



The Villainess Wants to Make Her Husband Slim Down

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Prologue 1

The daughter of Count Storm, Camilla Storm, is a villain.

The Second Prince of the Kingdom of Sonnenlicht, Julian, shared a love that transcended social status with a daughter of a baron named Liselotte Ende. A fairytale romance that lit the passions of the kingdom, still fresh in the minds of many.

The country had nothing but goodwill for the couple that overcame many hardships. Even now, a day doesn't go by where their love story isn't the topic on everybody's lips.

And the person who played an all too important role in this story was Camilla Storm.

Camilla, who too loved Prince Julian, did everything she could to interfere with the budding couple, causing them no end of trouble. She harboured a fit of deep jealousy for Liselotte, the Prince's lover, tormenting and harassing her mercilessly.

Her wicked deeds are too numerous to quote.

Camilla spread a vicious rumour about Liselotte through high society.

"Liselotte only pursues Prince Julian to snatch royal power for herself. She is a harlot as well, slipping into bed with a new man every night."

She spread these lies as if they were gospel.

Camilla sought to entrap Liselotte using her power and isolating her in aristocratic circles.

She even went so far as to hire thugs to waylay and attack Liselotte. Fortunately, Prince Julian had managed to intervene just in time to save her, but Liselotte fainted from shock and didn't awaken for several days.

Using the power of her family, Camilla attempted to force an engagement between herself and Prince Julian. Due to Liselotte's scandalous activities, she wasn't fit for the royal family. Presenting herself to be a just an innocent person, she managed to win over not just the majority of nobles and the First Prince Eckhart, but also the King himself. Her engagement to the Prince seemed set in stone.

But, despite all that, Prince Julian and Liselotte stayed true to one another.

At the very moment that Prince Julian and Camilla's engagement was to be made official, Prince Julian revealed all of Camilla's crimes for everyone to hear.

The horrifying rumours Camilla had started about Liselotte, were in fact only true about Camilla herself.

Despite pretending to be the picture of innocence, she was, in fact, a wretched and vile woman.

In her quest to torment Liselotte to no end, she had hired ruffians to assault her, an unforgivable and inhuman atrocity.

His Majesty, the King, finally saw Camilla for what she truly was, annulling her engagement to Prince Julian. Instead, he accepted Liselotte as Prince Julian's true fiancée.

On the other hand, Camilla earned only the fury of the royal family for having tormented the innocent Liselotte to such extremes. After even her father, Count Storm, abandoned Camilla, she was sentenced to be banished from the country with naught but the clothes on her back.

However, Liselotte had a gentle heart and bore no grudge towards Camilla.

“We are two people who share the same love, I can truly understand Camilla’s feelings.”

Impressed by Liselotte’s magnanimous act, Prince Julian pardoned Camilla from exile.

Instead, for her many crimes, the Prince imposed a new punishment on Camilla.

She will marry whomever the Prince chose for her and she was never again to appear before the two of them.

The fiancée the Prince chose for Camilla was Duke Alois Montchat.

A branch family of the royal line, a prestigious lineage that has ruled the Duchy of Mohnton in the north of the kingdom for generations, a perfectly suited marriage for a member of Count Storm’s house. Rather, the Count’s house had more to gain.

However, this was still a punishment. Despite Alois Montchat’s high status, he was not a well thought of man.

In the gossip of high society, he was routinely referred to as ‘The Toad of the Swamp’.

The swamp referred to the geography of the Duchy of Mohnton, which was covered in marshes and wetlands. The ‘toad’ part referred to the figure Duke Montchat cut.

A grotesquely fat body. His skin was a hive of pimples and acne, covering his pudgy and ugly face, giving him the likeness of a disgusting toad. All of that alongside the fact that his huge body caused him to sweat profusely, giving off an awful smell, was the origin of his name.

He had a withdrawn and gloomy personality, hardly ever talking with anyone. It was only for the most pompous of royal occasions that he crawled out of his swamp to visit the capital. And even then, everyone kept their distance.

From afar, you could still see just how freakish he truly was. His stomach was three times the breadth of a regular man. His gray hair was always damp and slimy, as if he had just emerged from a bog. Those two eyes that peeked between his locks of hair were like a reptile’s, cold and unfeeling. His red eyes retained deep magical power and no one would meet his gaze, for fear of falling under his curse.

That Duke Montchat will turn twenty-three this year. It was about the time in his life where he should consider marriage. But just which unfortunate soul in polite society would ever deign to marry such a man? He was another horror story spoken of in hushed whispers by the daughters of nobility, akin to ghosts that haunted the royal palace.

In short, he was treated as a source of trouble.

So, it was with welcome relief that people celebrated Prince Julian’s decision.

There was no noblewoman who wished to marry the gloomy and unsightly Duke Montchat. It seemed an appropriate fate for Camilla, a villain who had callously wielded her family's power to put Liselotte through all sorts of ordeals.

The newspapers of the kingdom ran with the conclusion of the beautiful love story of the royal couple, the extra editions in the hands of everyone in the capital.

Prologue 2

——— I can't possibly accept this. Why on earth must I have to see such a dreadful place?

As she looked over the swampy marshes, extending as far as the eye can see, Camilla tried to steady her quivering hands.

Certainly, she had desired to be the fiancée of the Prince.

But, that was the desire of every noble girl that age. In high society, there were very few people who didn't greatly admire Prince Julian, who had stunningly good looks even amongst the other members of the royal family. In addition, compared to the stern and humourless First Prince, he was compassionate and jovial, the kind of man who was always popular with women.

Certainly, Camilla was responsible for starting a rumour along the lines of 'Liselotte Ende is a loose woman'.

But, she hadn't fanned the flames of gossip on purpose. Camilla had seen Liselotte walking with a man other than the Prince one day and had simply brought it up idly with other noble daughters. The story had acquired legs and a new pair of shoes by the time it had arrived back at her feet. Even if Camilla may have inadvertently started it, if the story takes on a life of its own as it spreads, she could hardly be blamed for what it became.

Certainly, she had used the power of her house. She had used it incessantly.

She had used her parent's influence to gain entry to tea parties she wasn't invited to and to take the hand of the Prince at the ball's first dance. But, was there anything wrong with that? As far as she was concerned, it was like a beautiful person making use of their charm. If a talented person could use their ability to sing and dance to get close to the Prince, then why was it so wrong to use power to achieve the same end?

Certainly, she may have taken things too far. It was true that she was at odds with Liselotte, forcing her to tears at times, earning the wrath of the Prince and the shame of her parents.

But, that doesn't mean that Camilla was entirely in the wrong. Liselotte often cried crocodile tears and at times didn't hesitate to return the favour to Camilla.

Despite her meek appearance, Liselotte was no shrinking violet. For every insult Camilla threw at Liselotte, she hurled back five more. Rumours about Liselotte aside, stories were beginning to spread about Camilla as well. Far from being isolated herself, Liselotte had instead been the one who sought to ostracize Camilla from polite society in return. The only way Camilla could claw her way back was through influence and financial power.

Besides, Camilla wasn't the only enemy Liselotte had to contend with. Camilla aside, there was no shortage of people who tormented Liselotte. Rather, Camilla was blamed for a lot of their actions. However, when the tables turned, things changed very quickly. All those who had once oppressed her soon took Liselotte's side. Only Camilla, who could never give up on her love for the Prince, continued to oppose Liselotte till the very end.

Certainly ———— Camilla had made many mistakes. However, she was by no means the monster the newspapers made her out to be. She had simply been painted as the perfect villain in the love story between the Baron's daughter and the Prince.

In that way, she had been cast out from her home, forced into a betrothal with a grotesquely hideous man and become the topic of ridicule and scorn in high society.

This kind of ending, how could she possibly accept it?

But despite everything, the gossip, the humiliation and the banishment, what Camilla truly refused to accept above all else was the man she now beheld.

"Miss Camilla, is it to your liking? It is a boar caught in the western forest. It's dripping with grease and truly delectable."

The Montchat manor, deep in the Duchy of Mohnton. In the courtyard of that mansion that sat atop a lone hill, Alois, the Lord Montchat, said so as he stuffed himself with another mouthful of meat.

Before Alois, enough meat was stacked that it seemed to make up a wild boar all of its own. The meat was cooked on the bone, its once white hue burned black in the oven. Just like Alois said, the meat is glistening with fatty globules.

The mountain before him grew smaller and smaller as Alois attacked it with the knife and fork skills of a seasoned veteran. The juices flowing from the meat splashed on the napkin hanging from the cuff of his shirt, leaving a great many stains. But Alois didn't care about such trivialities, devouring the meat with indulgent relish.

Camilla kept her distance from Alois and looked his gluttonous body up and down. It was early afternoon and the sun had just begun its descent into the west. It's not an appropriate time for breakfast or lunch, let alone dinner.

"Lord Alois... I... I came because you said this was to be a tea party."

"Tea... Ah, I have some! How many lumps of sugar do you take? Five? Perhaps six?"

Camilla and Alois sat at opposite ends of the large table, facing one another. Atop the table, dwarfed by the mountain of boar meat, sat a small pot of tea and a jar of sugar cubes.

"Lord Alois... I... I believe I made myself clear earlier. I have no intention of marrying you."

"Yes, yes. I heard you. You haven't stopped saying it since you arrived..."

Alois' silently drooped his head at Camilla's words. Even so, it wasn't as if he could simply will his body to shrink, and he definitely wasn't going to give up the meat in his hand.

"With the way I am now, you said you couldn't bring yourself to seal our marriage with a kiss. Therefore, unless I slim down, you can't consent to our wedding."

"That's right. Well then, Lord Alois, do you also remember how you answered me when I told you that?"

“Of course I do! I vowed to lose weight, just for you. That way, I can marry you without fail!”



The toad of the swamp half rose to his feet as he spoke passionately. The table rumbled as he shifted in his chair. Enduring the earthquake-like shaking, Camilla let her feelings be known.

“Then ————”

Even if her mouth was curled into a smile, that expression was a mere mask.

“At least put a little bit of effort into losing some weight, you gelatinous frog ————！！”

Camilla cried, grasping at Alois’ arm to try and separate the meat from his jaws.

The sensation she felt on her palms at that time was something she wouldn’t soon forget. As she touched Alois, it wasn’t clear just where his fat ended and the meat in his hand began.

Camilla could never accept it.

How could she ever exchange holy vows and kiss such a gluttonous frog in the sight of God?

It can’t be helped to be forced to marry at some else’s discretion. Camilla was a noblewoman, after all. Political marriages were the norm in her world, she had long since accepted that.

But, on the other hand, Camilla was still an eighteen-year-old maiden. Even if she had to give up on marrying for love, there were certain lines that Camilla had to draw.

And this frog-like man was far, far removed from that line.

At the very least, until the man in front of her became someone that Camilla could bear to kiss.

That unkempt hair atop greasy skin encasing a bulbous body, wrapped in clothes that should never be seen in the public eye. She would have to shape him from the ground up.

—————Until he can measure up, I'll have to educate him...!

Shuddering as she watched Alois, Camilla etched that vow upon her heart.

01

The Duchy of Mohnton is characterized by its expansive swamps.

Covered in a blanket of miasma, this land that is constantly humid all year round was also a major source of manastones.

The miasma that oozes from the depths of the bogs gives rise to strong magical energies. Over the course of years, this magical power crystallized into a type of gem commonly known as a manastone. Therefore, wherever the miasma is thickest, one can find more and more gathering operations.

Manastones are used to brighten rooms, as well as keep them cool in the summer and warm during the winter, they can even power the engines of ships. Lately, they have been used as a power source to keep gears turning as well. They have become a necessity to people's daily lives.

The manastones of the Duchy of Mohnton were top quality, with high magical energy. Even if the place was called a swamp and never saw tourists, due to the demand for manastones it was quite enriched.

This has resulted in quite an indulgent food culture.

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“Lord Alois! You cannot be eating things like this!”

As Camilla yelled in front of him, Alois swallowed down that fatty morsel. Fried lumps of flour and oil, with powdered sugar thickly coating its surface, it was an intensely unhealthy snack — a doughnut.

“A-Ah, that's not it, Camilla. Since I'm working so late tonight, if I don't properly nourish myself——”

“How much more nourishment does your body need!?”

That excess nourishment jiggled in his gut a bit as Alois shrunk into his chair. As he leaned back like that, it was as if his neck disappeared, his chin instead forming a collar of fat. As she saw the sweat ooze out from the folds of meat that could only be called excess chins, Camilla was filled with a sense of exasperation in her heart.

“Lord Alois, do you have any idea just how much you eat in one day? You eat in the middle of the night, then you wake up and eat breakfast, then brunch, then lunch, then afternoon tea, then dinner and then even dessert! Seven meals! That's more than twice that of a normal person, is it not!?”

What's more, everything he eats is either disgustingly sweet or incredibly fatty. The treats he prefers are so saccharine, it's like eating cubes of sugar.

Camilla had also been born into a wealthy family, so she knew what it meant to have a rich diet, but this was just extraordinary. Actually, rather than a rich diet, this was just food violence.

All this greasy and fatty food were like heavy blows to Camilla's stomach. Thanks to that, Camilla wasn't eating much.

But still, Alois exceeds Camilla's imagination.

“Camilla, that’s not true. Before sleeping, I take another simple dinner, so it’s actually eight meals.”

“You fat slob!!!!”

As Alois said something so outrageous as if it were nothing at all, Camilla yelled far louder than she had intended. Startled, she pressed her hands over her mouth. Even though she hadn’t held back her sharp tongue before when it came to calling Alois fat or a toad, she realized that just now she had gone too far.

Despite everything, the person in front of her was still a duke from the royal bloodline. Camilla was both lower in stature as a count’s daughter and also younger by five years, she wasn’t in a position to speak to him like that.

But, Alois didn’t seem too troubled by Camilla’s piercing words, laughing as he took another bite. ‘Now now’, he shook his thick hands sticky with sugar, trying to soothe her. Camilla felt dizzy.

“It wouldn’t do to simply leave something that had been made with such great care. So, please overlook it, just for today. From tomorrow onwards, I’ll be more diligent.”

As Alois laughed, his whole body shook. It was like a toad puffing itself up.

Such a man was to be Camilla’s future husband.

○

Thinking back, Alois had always been like this since they first met.

It had been one week prior, after Camilla had just arrived in the Mohnton lands. He didn’t become enraged when Camilla insulted his figure to his face, or when she starkly refused to kiss him.

Even when Camilla said “I will not marry you”, he reacted the same way. She would rather be killed than marry such an ugly man. When she had told him such a thing so bluntly, Alois simply laughed as if it were some minor quibble.

If you were to put it in a kind way, you could say that he was as tolerant as he was rotund. But to put it another way, you could say he was weak against cruel words and unable to stand up for himself. No matter how mad Camilla was, if Alois shrugs his shoulders and simply says that he’s in the wrong, she’ll eventually quiet down and the storm will pass. No matter what Camilla says, Alois never got angry and very rarely refuted her. He just nodded along, telling her that he will ‘do his best’.

However, Camilla hasn’t seen an ounce of this effort. With that same mouth that he used to say he would ‘do his best’, he devoured meat as if he were drinking water and ate an unending supply of sweets.

In what way was he any different to a beast? Camilla had no answer.

————— How could I ever marry such a man?

After leaving Alois’ study, Camilla’s looked to the floor as she sighed.

Leaning against the closed door, her shoulders slumped. Surely, back in that room, Alois is happily eating his doughnuts again now that Camilla isn't there to bother him.

Those sugar encrusted hands. The floor covered in crumbs and leftovers. The doughnuts disappearing as if falling into a pit. Just the thought of it made Camilla tremble.

So long as she kept her distance and simply exchanged words, she could keep her composure. Since Alois isn't as gloomy as the rumours say and seemed quite weak in character, that is the answer. Although, it would become another issue entirely if they were married.

If they became a real couple, those thick hands would grab at Camilla as if he were greedily swiping another doughnut. He would kiss Camilla with that toad-like face and that greasy skin of his would press against Camilla's own.

Just the thought of it sent a cold chill up Camilla's spine.

—— I cannot marry him if he stays like this, absolutely not...!!

The thought of Liselotte and the other women in high society giggling and laughing at the idea of Camilla marrying Alois flashed through her mind. Putting aside Liselotte, who she was never on good terms with in the first place, the idea of being laughed at by those who used to follow her and even had their statuses raised by associating with Camilla hurts the most. How can they just use and abandon her like that?

“——I won't give up. I'll make sure to show you all...!”

Alois is an inheritor of the royal bloodline. And in that royal family, everyone is excessively good looking. So, perhaps, the same could be said for Alois if he lost all that weight.

The most important thing was his grey hair and magical, red eyes, characteristics unique to the royal line. Although he only belongs to a branch family, it's clear that royal blood still runs strongly in his veins.

“If that's the case, I simply have to get him to lose weight... It's bad for his health being that fat, and it's just a waste of his good blood.”

“Who are you calling a waste?”

“Hiii!?”

Camilla let out a yelp as a voice cut in out of nowhere. As she looked around in a hurry, she saw a middle-aged woman standing in the hallway, dimly illuminated by a lit candlestick.

“Do you have some complaint about Lord Alois?”

It was Gerda, the head maid, who had served the Montchat family faithfully for many years. Her slim figure stands in stark contrast to Alois', coupled with her tightly gathered hair and furrowed eyebrows, she leaves a stern impression.

“Were you bothering Lord Alois who is working so late into the night?”

“N-No.”

“Were you intending to spoil the few pleasures of the ever labouring Lord Alois?”

“That’s not why...”

Gerda’s stern gaze held Camilla captive. Sheer animosity swam in those dark green eyes.

“Do you even understand your position at all? A wicked girl who conspired to seduce Prince Julian and disparage Her Highness?”

Camilla’s shoulders twitched at those words. She raised her face and glared back at Gerda, but she couldn’t say anything. The way she looked at Camilla, it was as if she were staring at a dying insect on its back, twitching its last.

“The only reason you walk free is due to His Highness Prince Julian’s mercy and Lord Alois’ generous spirit. Otherwise, a woman like you would be dead in some filthy ditch. I will thank you for understanding just where you stand from now on, see to it that you don’t misunderstand your place again.”

“Wha...”

She opened her mouth to argue back, but no words came out. It’s true, Camilla’s position was just as Gerda had said. To the people of this world, Camilla was a ‘villain’ whom everyone longed to see exiled. If Camilla truly was this ‘villain’ then she should be thankful that she’s even being allowed the opportunity to breathe free air.

“From now on, don’t do anything unnecessary. If Lord Alois sees fit to cast you out, you will have nowhere to go. Don’t you ever forget that.”

After saying so, she curtly opened the door to the study and entered as if Camilla weren’t even there, leaving her standing stunned in the hallway.

In front of the room that Gerda had just entered. Two of the manor’s maids passed by Camilla, who was still standing in shocked silence. When they saw Camilla, they quickly hurried on, not even sparing her a single pleasantry.

“Hey, isn’t she the one?”

As they were leaving, the two maids’ whisperings reached Camilla’s ears.

“That villainess from the stories? She really does look the part after all.”

“I feel so sorry for poor Lord Alois. No matter how he looks, he should be able to marry a much better lady.”

“Then, why don’t you be his bride?”

“Oh, you, I was just kidding.”

In that dark hallway, in the dead of the night, the gossiping of those two careless maids echoed through the corridors. Those maids who were none the wiser giggled to themselves as they kept walking deeper into the mansion.

A chill and damp wind whistled through the hallway as if to drown out the girls' ridicule.

Camilla still stood alone, rooted to the spot.

Just some housekeeping notes about this series:

1 – I'll be aiming to release daily, mostly because the chapters are quite short (1k-1.5k words compared to the 2.5k+ words per chapter of MotoMusu). It'll also be my priority series going forward over my other ones, for now at least.

2 – I'm trying to be a bit more strict with this translation. I won't be changing the formatting of the novel to a bulkier western style (because I'm lazy), but I won't be keeping in things such as SFX or honorifics like I sometimes do with other series. Ironically, I will be keeping the Japanese title going forward, though I'll be shortening it to 'Yasesasetai' when talking about it.

3 – The illustrations will be up on the 18th. I wasn't going to release today, but since two different people released their versions of the prologue out of nowhere I don't really have a choice, since I don't want to get gazumped.

02

To my dearest cousin,

My beloved Camilla, it has been far too long.

How are you finding life in Mohnton?

In the royal capital, there are still many rumours floating around about you. In the newspapers, it's written that you're already in the first stages of pregnancy, dear cousin, is that true? If it's so, then I'm delighted for you.

But I can't help but wonder... Will you give birth to a human? Or, perhaps, tadpoles?

Anyways, it has been a full week since you left for the Duchy of Mohnton, my dear cousin. And by the time you receive this letter, I suppose another three days must have past?

By then, Prince Julian and Liselotte will have been formally engaged. Liselotte has received all manner of jewels and dresses from Prince Julian, every time she appears in public all the ladies sigh at her stunning beauty. I'm sure that being so beloved only makes her more charming.

Speaking of being loved, are you not the same? How is life alongside Duke Montchat? I am sure that you are feeling beloved and beautiful. Even if he may look like a swamp-dwelling toad, love is still love, after all. Perhaps, in time, you will attain a type of beauty suited to the swamp, dear cousin. Whenever I talk about it with my friends, I confess to them that I'm most envious of you.

My dearest cousin is married to Lord Montchat, a duke and a distant member of the royal family, after all. You may have become despised by Prince Julian and abandoned by uncle and aunty, but perhaps it was all for the best. My cousin was able to meet a partner who truly matched her perfectly.

Surely no one can interfere in the true love between Lord Montchat, the ugliest man in the world and my cousin, who is hated by the whole world. You compliment each other perfectly. Prince Julian doesn't seem to have forgiven you at all, but that's a mere triviality now that you can rely on your Lord Montchat.

Oh, yes, I just can't help but be envious of you. Actually, I myself decided to get engaged the other day.

*My partner is to be Damien, from the house of Count Gunther. It is rather embarrassing to admit as his status carries much less **weight** than Duke Montchat, but he is still the heir to a county. He is a kind person with a handsome face, though a little on the lean side. But although he's such a nice man, he's very popular with the women, so I do tend to get awfully jealous. I suppose that's something you don't have to worry about much with Lord Montchat?*

.....I'm sorry, I just can't help but envy you so much, dear cousin. It seems that I can't help but think about my cousin all the time. Just what kind of amazing life are you leading out there in the bogs? I just can't help but wonder.

In any case, once I get married myself, may I go and visit your lovely home, cousin? I'm sure by that time I'll have plenty of stories from the capital to tell you. I'd also love for you to meet my husband as

well. Ah, but, when we do visit, could you please have Lord Montchat wear a name tag? Otherwise, I might mistake him for a common toad.

*From your adorable cousin,
Therese*

P.S.

Have you received any letters from uncle and aunty? The two of them fawn over me so much, I worry that they may have forgotten about you, cousin. I did say to them that they ought to write, but... No way, by any chance, could their letters have become lost in the post?

○

After staring at it for a long while, Camilla tore the letter into pieces as if it were garbage.

Opening that envelope in the first place was a mistake. For a long time, Camilla and Therese have been something close to enemies. Since Camilla had always been so sharp-tongued herself and prone to disparaging others herself, it only makes sense that someone who despised her so much would be laughing to the point of tears at her circumstances.

But, even though she knew who had sent the letter, she had still opened it because she was so homesick for the capital.

It has only been ten days since she left. Camilla's position at the Montchat estate was truly some half-hearted thing, merely a pending candidate for betrothal. Although she's staying in a guest room, she isn't inconvenienced and the room itself is treated with great care, but she feels something of a wall between her and everyone else.

Especially because it seems that the bad rumours from the capital are beginning to trickle into the distant Mohnton territory.

The elderly servants glare at her, whilst the younger ones stare at her as if she's some sort of clown. Gossiping maids will talk and giggle to each other about her, even knowing full well that Camilla can see them. It's also the case that the maids are loath to wait upon Camilla, usually pressuring someone else into doing it. There are also a few people who show outright hostility to Camilla, including Gerda.

In remote Mohnton, Camilla has no close maid to confide in and no friend to rely on. Although the room may be good quality, the bed is unfamiliar to her and nothing on the shelves belongs to her. Clothes that she had never worn before. Humid air and strange winds.

No matter how much she strained, she couldn't see even a shadow of the capital as she looked out the window. For Camilla, there is no comfort.

And her cousin's letter just drove it all home.

Even though Therese should know Camilla well — Rather, it's because she knows Camilla so well that she could make the letter so piercing. Therese, who hated Camilla from a very young age, was probably beside herself with laughter right now.

Her cousin, Therese, was described as cute and adorable by all. Even Camilla's own parents seemed to dote on Therese more than her. On the other hand, anyone who she saw as an enemy or happened to earn her ire would be driven into a corner, as she used her charms to turn everyone against them. Therese's enemies would always be isolated in the end, without hope of escape.

Since Camilla was so strong and prideful, not falling to Therese's schemes, she had always considered her a true eyesore. She must be enjoying Camilla's current predicament even more than Liselotte was.

And, just like her words had implied, Camilla hadn't received a single letter from her parents. Surely, they were still doting over Therese instead.

For Camilla who is ridiculed and not missed by anyone, it must seem like the perfect ending for a villainess that the newspapers desired. Nobody cares about Camilla's own feelings. Nobody pitied her.

"———Gu"

Camilla closed her eyes. She stood in the third-floor room in the Montchat household that she had been given. She breathed in deeply from the damp marshy air that flowed through the window.

"Guuuuu...."

She bit her lip for a moment. She inhaled slowly, not letting an inch of breath escape. Then, grasping the letter she had torn,

"UAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!! I HATE THIIIIIS———!!"



Camilla screamed through the window. She threw the letter outside to the garden below. The torn pieces of paper caught in the wind, scattering about.

“Just why do you hate me so much!? I didn’t do anything to deserve this!?”

She simply loved Prince Julian. So, she came into conflict with Liselotte. She may have said some harsh things and used her position to approach the prince. But, that was all.

She didn’t hurt anyone. Everyone simply accepted it as truth that she had sent thugs to attack Liselotte, but she had never even dreamed of doing anything like that.

Confronted and condemned, driven from her home, separated from her parents and friends and finally, as an apparent act of mercy, forced to marry a grotesque man. Did she deserve this? Isn’t she just being made into some kind of sick joke for people to laugh at?

“Take a good look! Isn’t this what you wanted to see, me marrying a thing like that!?”

From the room in the manor atop the hill, the land was quiet leading all the way to the nearby town. All she can see is a gardener far in the distance, but otherwise, there was no one. Nobody there to hear Camilla’s cries.

But, Camilla didn’t care whether or not anyone heard her. How could she stop this quaking in her heart, if not by shouting? Of course, she wasn’t thinking about the consequences.

“But just you wait, I’ll be the one laughing in the end! Liselotte, Therese, even you, Prince Julian!!”

Therefore, she will do everything she can to leverage the power of the slow-witted Alois’ blood. No matter what, she won’t accept any excuses, and she won’t be abandoned again.

She won’t be naive anymore. Their faces will be twisted with regret and frustration once Camilla shapes Alois into a respectable man.

“I won’t lose so easily————!!”

Camilla yelled out into the sky of that strange land.

03

Just what could she do in order to reduce Alois' weight?

To be honest, there are just so many things she has to do that it's giving Camilla a headache.

Alois eats eight meals a day. He gets up in the night to eat a full meal and has already finished his actual breakfast by the time Camilla wakes up. He snacks constantly between meals, sometimes even having tea and sweets with visitors as well. After having dinner, he will more often than not take a second supper, not to mention his habit of midnight snacking.

She wasn't aware that so much food could even fit inside the human body. Or rather, it could be said that Alois eats so much that perhaps the limits of the human body shouldn't be applied to him.

Not to mention, even during his eight regular meals, the quantity of food is ridiculous and almost everything served is coated in grease and fat. Not to mention just how densely seasoned everything is. There are few vegetables to speak of at all, it's mostly just meat. Camilla couldn't stomach eating the same meals that Alois would take, usually asking to be served something from a different menu.

She would be told, 'What, do you refuse to eat the same things as your husband?' with a disgusted tone of voice, but in her mind she isn't the weird one for not wanting to eat that tongue-numbing pile of food.

The cakes and sweets that were served were little more than moulded lumps of sugar. No matter just how skilfully crafted they were in appearance, the overwhelming taste of sugar is torture on the tastebuds and even Camilla, who used to like sweet things, can't take more than a single bite before pushing them away.

Worst of all, Alois very rarely leaves the house at all. At the very most, he will join Camilla in the courtyard for a tea party or make a visit to a manastone gathering site in his territory. His hobbies were eating and reading books. He doesn't seem to be too comfortable when it comes to social situations, so even when he's invited to some event or ball in the capital, he simply sends back a declining letter.

Hmm, Camilla thought alone in her room.

Gathering her thoughts, it seems like this is the way forward?

First, reduce his amount of meals.

Eight meals are too much. In fact, there are so many that the words 'too much' might not suffice. She's not saying that he should start fasting. However, even reducing that diet by one meal would be a good start. Then, she could gradually whittle it down to a more normal number.

Second, change what food is being served.

So long as he only eats greasy foods, his body will naturally stay fat. Not to mention, there's also far too much sugar. And the amount of salt and seasoning is also excessive. If you were to ask Camilla, such foods need to be removed from his plate. She just can't understand how anyone can eat such greasy, sweet and salty foods.

Even a child knows that eating sweet things in excess will lead to becoming overweight. Right now, she wants to reduce the amount of salt, sugar and fat he's consuming by half. This alone should see a considerable improvement.

Third, exercise.

This goes without saying. If he continues to eat so much whilst shutting himself away, he will only ever gain weight. The first step is going outside. Just for walks. Then, over time, that can become running.

Fourth, have him participate in social life.

If you stand in the public eye, you have to look the part. She has to fix his appearance so that she won't be ashamed to be seen with him. She will have to slim down his fat figure and on top of that, she will have to do something about his greasy hair and those clothes that he hasn't replaced in years.

What was the first thing that came to mind when she came here?

———Shouldn't I just starve him and make him run around outside?

But although she had thought so originally, Camilla shook those thoughts out of her head now.

For someone without self-control, to attempt to force him into weight loss without any transitional period was a bad idea. He would simply give up straight away.

If she tried to rush things, he would never change.

——I have to take things slowly, it will doubtless be a long road ahead.

She's prepared for a lengthy battle.

First of all, she has to get through that fat toad's thick skin.

04

So, the first thing to do is ‘reduce the number of meals by one’.

“Lord Alois, perhaps you should refrain, just for today.”

The next day, Camilla put into place her plans to have Alois lose weight. It was during afternoon tea, a meal that had become almost routine for her to attend since coming to the Montchat manor. Camilla picked up the sweets prepared on the table in front of him as she said that.

Unlike the previous tea party which had been dominated by piles of meat, this one had been properly decorated with sweets being served instead. They weren’t sugar encrusted doughnuts. Lightly baked to a pleasant golden brown colour and moulded into odd shapes and sizes, it was a basket of quite normal looking cookies that had been served, although the basket was so full it was beginning to overflow.

—Even if they’re just ordinary biscuits, you’ll obviously gain weight if you eat this many.

That basket was so large you could probably fit Camilla’s head in it. And when she had taken it in order to keep it away from Alois, she noticed just how much it weighed as well.

Eating this much was just insanity. But, Alois accomplishes the insane on a daily basis.

“You intend to lose weight and marry me, do you not?”

“W-Why, of course!”

Alois responds just as meekly as always.

“Then, you must refrain from eating such things. I will return this to the kitchen for you.”

“Ah, um, but...”

As Camilla made that assertion, Alois frowned as if presented with a puzzle. Then, in his melancholy, his hand reached out and grabbed a massive fistful of sugar cubes and dropped them into his teacup.

“But, I’d feel sorry for the chef who worked so hard at baking them.”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about the cook’s feelings, it’s his job!”

The cook simply cooks what he is told. It shouldn’t matter to him what happens to his food after that. In the first place, a cook that makes such an unhealthy amount of food for one person shouldn’t be considered a good cook. Actually, maybe since it’s Alois, this is just the normal amount?

“No, no, Camilla. That’s wrong.”

As Camilla’s hands trembled a little trying to withstand the weight of the basket, Alois shook his head with a strangely serious and sage look on his face.

“Since the chef worked so hard, we must respect the food he poured his sweat and blood into making. Anyone can simply make food. However, if someone does it for a living, then they must truly value their work. That value is then reflected in the food. The dishes are proof of the value of their effort. To simply throw it away would be like rejecting their value, their pride, as a chef.”

“U...Umm...”

“Please, try a bite. Today’s sweets are special, after all. I think that you’ll truly find them to your tastes.”

After he said that, Camilla hesitantly put the basket back down on the tea table. Then, taking a biscuit, she took a small bite.

“.....It’s quite a simple taste.”

Certainly, it fit Camilla’s tastes. Crushed nuts were rolled into the cookie dough, giving the biscuit a strong and chewy texture.

“Right? I tried it once before and found the taste strange, but quite delicious.”

“But, this wasn’t made by the chef, was it? *It’s almost as if you prepared it yourself.*”

At Camilla’s observation, Alois smiled.

“You figured it out that quickly? You’re right, the chef didn’t make these. They were actually made by an old woman who runs an orphanage in Mohnton. Her husband passed away, so now she manages it alone.”

However, the orphanage had become run-down over the years. Originally, it was a home where the elderly couple would simply pick up some children off the street out of sympathy to raise and nurture, but word of their kindness spread and soon there were more children than they could handle. They never had profit in mind. But, because of how many children there were, it was impossible to raise them all with their meager funds.

When she was at the end of their rope, Alois had offered his charity.

The old woman, however, refused to take a donation. If she received money in exchange for nothing, she said that it wouldn’t teach the children to respect the value of it. The children may face a harsh future once they leave the orphanage. However, she didn’t want them to fall into becoming beggars.

Therefore, Alois proposed to instead give the money in exchange for the old woman’s cookies. When he visited the orphanage to hand over the donation, he took the sweets for today’s tea party in return. That way, the money wasn’t being given freely. That was enough to persuade the old woman.

The cookie dough was kneaded with crushed nuts gathered from the forest near the orphanage. The old woman rolled the dough, whilst the young children shaped it into forms.

“So that’s why they were such odd shapes...”

Camilla pursed her lips as she stared at the cookie in her hand. None of them was a clean round form, but some of them had quite childlike shapes, looking like rabbits or dogs.

The orphanage’s little kitchen must have been in a real state that day. The children hustling and bustling, learning more about the value of money as they made cookies to sell to Alois. It’s hard to imagine throwing away cookies made like that. How crushed would those children be, if they saw their work simply tossed aside like garbage?

The work of those little chefs wasn't just about taste or appearance. The fact that they had poured their heart and effort into it, that's what gave it value.

"So, do you see what I mean?"

Alois smiled as he reached his hand out to the basket. Grabbing a mass of cookies, he chomped them all down at once.

She can't help but frown at his way of eating.



“Oh, I see,” Alois said, as if he realized something, as Camilla was lost for words.

“You’re quite unexpectedly meek at times, aren’t you?”

Alois’ eyes narrowed jovially as he scoffed down more biscuits. Although he didn’t make the sound, it was as if he were laughing at her. Camilla found that expression of his quite repugnant.

——By any chance, did I just get strung along…?

Impossible. Camilla shook the thought from her head. Just like his appearance suggests, he’s a dull and unintelligent man. He’s also a coward, any time Camilla raised her voice, he would shrink back and begin to tremble.

How could such a man ever manage to play Camilla for a fool?

05

She continued on, not having learned much from the experience. ‘Second, change what kind of food he is served’, so it was.

Although the Duchy of Mohnton may be affluent, sugar and fatty food are still considered luxuries. Especially sugar that had been refined to a pure white colour, the likes of which rarely if ever found itself in the dishes of commoners.

Camilla also came from a noble house. As a member of Count Storm’s family, she never was left wanting when it came to sugar, but she was still aware of how expensive it truly was.

However, Alois uses it as if it were water. Not metaphorically, but truly like water. The amount of sugar that he melts into his tea rivals the amount of liquid originally in the cup. Food violence that recklessly disregarded the delicate taste of the tea leaves.

The levels of seasoning were violent as well. There is no industry of salt production of Mohnton, so all supplies of it are imported from elsewhere, yet despite this it is used as if it were abundant. Sometimes, eating the food here felt no different to biting into a lump of salt.

Previously, Alois had espoused to Camilla that a chef’s value lay in his cooking. But, thinking about it rationally, it wouldn’t matter who made it at all with this level of seasoning. It’s so salty you can barely taste the original dish, it’s an insult to the poor food on the plate.

When she originally arrived at the Montchat manor, Camilla had been violently ill after tasting the same type of food that Alois ate on a daily basis because of the excessive salt. This much had to be bad for your health.

But, what could she say in order to have the types of meals changed?

She thought about talking to Alois directly, but Camilla gave up that idea straight away. Because of how things had gone the other day, talking to Alois seemed like a lost cause.

If not Alois, then perhaps the chef? Or, the one who takes care of Alois the most ——— The head maid, Gerda?

——No.

Absolutely not. She’s the last person Camilla wanted to talk to.

Because, Gerda was the one who seemed to despise Camilla the most. She wouldn’t even hear her out.

But, if she spoke to the chef herself, Gerda would inevitably hear about it. The writing of menus and organization of ingredients isn’t something handled by the chef alone. If the sugar content suddenly dropped, it would raise suspicions and if the menu changed, the servants would obviously notice.

Most of all, the idea of interfering with Alois’ daily life whilst trying to leave Gerda in the dark was terrifying. Everything comes back to Gerda. With that frightful attitude of hers, she would no doubt stop Camilla’s plans.

In that case, it’s best to simply tell her from the beginning.

——.There's nothing else for it.

As long as she continues to waver, Alois will never lose weight. Camilla has to do this, for her own sake.

Besides, Gerda is the faithful maid of the House of Montchat. She may be open to talking about Alois' diet. In fact, she may even agree with Camilla's demands without any problems.

o

"Use only the best ingredients without being miserly. Those were the words of the late Master and Mistress."

Of course, there was a problem.

Committed to keeping Alois' diet to the status-quo, Gerda cast her usual cold glare at Camilla as she told her as such.

"The best fat, the best sugar, the best salt. It is the pride of the Montchat family to use everything plentifully and to never worry about the food piled on the plate. The Master and Mistress were always saying that."

The previous heads of the House of Montchat. Alois' parents had already passed away. She had heard that Alois was only fifteen years old when the two of them fell victim to an accident. It had been eight years since Alois had inherited his position as the Duke of Mohnton, but all of the veteran servants, including Gerda, still used 'Master' and 'Mistress' to refer to the deceased Duke and Duchess.

Like Alois, his parents did not travel much outside of their own lands, so they weren't well known in the royal court. She hadn't heard much about them from Alois, but from what she could glean from the servants, they were very well thought of.

——But, you really did spoil him.

If it wasn't for that, then there's no way he would look the way he did today. As a result of raising him to eat as much as possible without having to worry about restraint, he's lost his sense of self-control when it comes to food.

"Even so, there has to be a limit to being plentiful, right? If you overuse seasoning, it overpowers the taste of the meal. That being said, maybe it would be better if I ——"

She was about to say something, but Camilla bit back the words. Some utterly strange line almost left her lips. She shook her head at the thought of it.

"If his late parents saw Lord Alois now, I'm sure they would be grieving."

"Why are you speaking as if you understand a single thing?"

Gerda slammed her hand on the bench as she said that. Her already cold glare turned to ice.

"Lord Alois has absolutely nothing to be ashamed of as the head of the Montchat family. By eating the way he does, he honours the late Master and Mistress —— In other words, it's about the love between

a child and his parents. Who are you to get in the way of that? You who came here, despite being so unwelcome?”

——Guh.....

As much as she wanted to speak, she had no answer.

Gerda hadn't left her a single opportunity to interject, so Camilla had no choice but to slink away in dejection.

06

In that case, it was time for her third plan, ‘exercise’.

Honestly though, it was hard for Camilla to imagine that huge figure of his exercising. It was strange enough that such a barrel shaped human being could even walk upright. Since Alois is so heavy, whenever he moves it seems like things sway slightly around him as he walks. Camilla was frightened by this sensation when she first arrived, thinking that it was some kind of earthquake, but now she just responds with ‘Oh, Alois is walking’.

But, exercise is absolutely necessary to lose weight. Moreover, in order to turn Therese green with envy, it would be best if he put on a little muscle as well. So, she has no choice but to move the mountains.

○

As they ate a meal, Alois and Camilla faced each other.

Although, even though this is an actual meal, Alois is usually eating something at all times anyways. If anything, calling it a meal is just a formality, but it does give them an opportunity to meet. And these opportunities were called breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as morning tea.

Moreover, Alois and Camilla’s lives didn’t really synch up with each other. Camilla is treated as a half-hearted bridal candidate, which in reality means she has nothing to do, but as a duke, Alois is shouldering a lot of responsibilities every day.

It seemed like Alois took care to clear out his schedule so that he could always take morning tea with Camilla.

Camilla, meanwhile, wished that he would put that much care into improving his figure instead.

“Lord Alois, do you have any hobbies involving physical exercise, by any chance?”

Camilla asked him that as they sat outside during morning tea on a fine day. Camilla wasn’t going to dive straight into the topic of making him do some exercise without any tact at all. She had learned that much.

The sweet treat on offer today was a cake that was plastered in sugar. Even the layers of sponge beneath the icing and the cream between them only tasted like sugar. Despite the fact that Camilla had to push her plate aside after only one bite, Alois ate it hand over fist.

“I’m not particularly suited to moving my body around like that. I much prefer to read a good book instead.”

Alois’ answer didn’t leave much room for surprise. It was exactly how Camilla had expected him to respond.

“Even though you’re a noble, you don’t practice fencing or riding horses?”

The nobles of Sonnenlicht are usually also knights. Of course, commanding soldiers is left to the lower rungs of the aristocracy and all the fighting and dying is done by commoners. But, technically

speaking, nobles are expected to be able to participate in a war. And for that, they kept up with horse riding and practicing their swordplay.

Although someone who has reached the status of a duke couldn't practice alongside the lower aristocracy, they were still expected to keep up the equestrian and fencing skills. If their territory suffered invasion, they would have to take command of their forces, but a commander who can't ride a horse could hardly lead anyone to battle.

"Well, in the past, I probably used to do things like that..."

Alois scratched his head as if he were troubled by it. Back in the day, was he leaner? Did such a time truly exist?

Camilla eyed him with suspicion since she had always thought that he must have been born into the world in this round shape.

"Don't you have any interest in picking them up again? Surely moving around will help you to think more clearly, no?"

"No, you see, I..."

As he mumbled out some excuse, Alois didn't look her in the eyes. Then, blinking, he suddenly looked at Camilla as if he suddenly realized something.

"Camilla, what kind of hobbies do you enjoy?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I've never heard you talk about anything like that, so I was interested."

—— That makes sense.

When it came to conversations between Alois and Camilla, it usually boiled down to food. Camilla trying to stop Alois filling his face with food and the young duke attempting to make excuses. That was all it ever was. When Alois' detestable body shape caught her eye, it was inevitable. When she looked at that shape of his, she didn't feel like discussing things like hobbies and family like normal men and women did together.

So, this sudden question had left Camilla a little lost for words. Because of this surprise attack, Camilla suddenly forgot the hobbies she kept up with only was window dressing to impress others.

".....ing."

"Ing?"

Alois repeated the tail end of the word that Camilla muttered, so quietly that Alois could only catch that. Just then, Camilla realized that she had almost blurted it out.

"Ah, no, my hobby isn't particularly interesting at all, you know? It's not something you would care to hear about!"

"That's not true at all. If it's Camilla telling me, I want to hear everything."

The frog drew nearer. Because of his huge body leaning forward over the table, it begins to slope at an angle and a cup of tea teeters on the edge of spilling. Reflexively, Camilla reached out to stop the teacup from falling over, but when she looked back up she found herself reflected in his eyes.

“I’m afraid you might find it boring here at the manor, so it would be good if you had a hobby to keep you busy. If you need anything, I can prepare whatever you would like. Please just let me know.”

“No... No no no no! Don’t pay it any mind!”

“You don’t need to hold back on my account.”

Alois’ face drew ever closer as he leaned across the table. Even though it wasn’t a particularly hot day, sweat glistened on Alois’ face, giving off an almost palpable sense of heat the nearer he came.

Camilla couldn’t meet his gaze. But even though she turned her eyes away, it was impossible to not see Alois’ body, like a blanket covering her vision. ‘Please tell me’, it seemed to be coercing her.

——Urgh...

In her mind, Camilla was biting her lip. This man doesn’t take a hint. She had tried to broach the topic of exercise by cleverly bringing it up as a potential hobby, but it seems to have backfired spectacularly.

——It can’t be helped. A-n-y-t-h-i-n-g beats being stared at like this.

Exhaling a deep breath, Camilla said it.

“.....I like to cook.”

Camilla murmured the words as if she were confessing some great sin.

“It’s not something I like to talk about much, but... I like to cook things like meals and sweets... Since I’m the daughter of a count, I’m ashamed of having a hobby like this...”

In Sonnenlicht, nobility would never have to stoop so low as to do their own cooking. Cooking is a job that involves butchering and wetting one’s hands with blood. It’s the work of a man to sully their hands with foreign blood. And more than that, only a base born man should be having to handle corpses.

Even if a nobleman decided to hunt on horseback, he would bring along a servant to handle the quarry. For an aristocrat’s hunt, the work is done once the prey is felled. The bleeding and gutting are left to their lessers.

Blood aside, making bread and sweets isn’t well thought of either. The kitchen is seen as an unclean place, not to mention that mingling with chefs whilst using knives and coming into contact with fire was highly unbecoming for a nobleman’s daughter.

Of course, this wasn’t the case for commoners. In their world, both men and women baked and cooked. Some even aimed to become chefs. There was nothing shameful in it at all.

As for Camilla, she awakened to this hobby of hers when she was seven. The first time she secretly made sweets in the kitchen was when she was coaxed into it by a particularly bad maid. She didn’t make cookies with some sort of conviction like the orphans had. But when she felt the joy of seeing others eat what she made, that’s when it all began.

However, when they found out, Camilla's parents frowned upon it and Therese made fun of her. 'Camilla, my dear cousin, do you still cook like you did back then? I am praying for you that the dirtiness of the kitchen doesn't contaminate your body. I pray each and every day for you, but it seems like my prayers go unanswered', ever since they were children, Therese had teased her about it like that, so she began to feel deeply ashamed of her hobby. She swore never to let anyone know about it.

But, Camilla is also vulnerable to the heat of the moment. She's not good at hiding her true feelings or deceiving others. It's one of the factors that got her banished from the capital as a villain.

"Cooking, is it?"

Alois, however, simply nodded as she sat anxiously.

"That's a good hobby."

Camilla couldn't tell straight away if he was being honest or sarcastic. If it was Therese, 'good hobby' could only be something said at her expense, but this was Alois. Judging from his appearance, Alois is a dimwitted fool, so could he really have put such an implied meaning like that in his words?

"...You really think it's a good hobby? Yet, still, it's not exactly a praiseworthy hobby for a noblewoman, is it not?"

As Camilla asked him doubtfully, Alois looked confused for a moment. Then, he seemed to realize what she meant.

"In the duchy of Mohnton, we love food above everything else. Even if it might be something looked down on in the capital, that's not true here. Anybody who can make delicious food is someone to be admired."

"....Even a noblewoman?"

"Of course. Noble or commoner, it doesn't matter. Cooking is both honourable and a virtue. Something to be proud about, not ashamed of."

Camilla looked down in silence. She had always hidden her hobby away, never bringing it up with others, so this was the very first time a fellow aristocrat had praised her pastime.

——E-Even if this frog tells me that, it doesn't make me....!!

Happy.

She's truly frustrated at how happy those words made her.

She doesn't want him to see just how foolish her face looks right now. However, when the thought that maybe this place wasn't so bad after all crept into her mind, Camilla shook her head.

——N-No... I can't take something like this as a conciliation...!

"You're free to use the manor's kitchen anytime you please. My only request is that if you make anything, please let me taste it as well."

"You'd truly eat it? Ah, y-yes, then I will!"

Holding her hands to her cheek, Camilla answered impulsively.

Because, she didn't think she'd have a chance to get someone to eat her cooking. When Camilla was living in the capital, there was someone that she could perhaps call a customer of hers. But, now that she was all alone in this distant land, Camilla had even been prepared to give up her hobby of cooking forever.

She liked making things, but the true joy lay in having others enjoy her food.

—“Cookies, I'm so sorry I tried to throw you away.

As a fellow cook, it was something she should never do. Camilla apologized in her heart as she did her best to keep her mouth closed and hide that swelling feeling of joy inside her.

“I'm looking forward to it.”

Alois, meanwhile, simply smiled at Camilla like usual.

Camilla, who was thinking just how much of her food she could have him eat, didn't realize something important at the time.

○

“How is making you eat more going to help me!!!”

It was a while after leaving Alois. At the end of the day, Camilla finally realized it.

She had intended for him to lose weight, but somehow she had been roped into making him even fatter.

“H-How can he flatter me so easily like that... He's just a frog man...!”

It was a blunder. She had been taken for a ride by such a stupid man again.

No, the fact that she was finally beginning to realize something means that she wasn't completely being played for a fool.

Is it possible that he was actually smarter than Camilla realized?

07

If she couldn't force him to change his eating habits, fix up his meals or convince him to exercise, then only her fourth and final method remained, 'socializing'.

A noble's duties included being present at social engagements and balls with other members of high society.

The midday tea party isn't loud, but it has a certain quiet elegance that catches the eye. The musical shows and theater troupes that play at night engage both emotionally and intellectually. And when it came time to dance at a ball, only the boldest outfits were chosen.

The gatherings of nobles were always rigidly assessed affairs. A slight mistake could make you the object of laughter and appearing out of place would see you scorned and ridiculed. Alois would probably find himself shown the door no matter what he wore, but it wouldn't hurt to freshen up his appearance just a little bit.

It may sound cruel to say this, but if she appeared in public alongside Alois as he was right now, Camilla would certainly be exposed to mockery. Truth be told, she hadn't wanted to resort to this just yet.

But, since every other means had failed, this was her last resort. In order to make them all pay one day, she could endure this temporary shame.

In order to slim Alois down, she would have to resort to a more direct method.

o

As Camilla made her intentions clear, Alois looked troubled as he tilted his neck. Well, frankly speaking, it was hard to tell where his neck ended and his chin began, but that's beside the point.

"The Montchat family aren't really the type to go out in public much."

'Let's go to a salon, that much should be fine!' Camilla had enthusiastically said those words as she burst into Alois' room just before.

"The Montchat family isn't quite like everyone else, didn't you know that, Camilla? I thought it was quite well known."

Alois sighed as he shook his head. Even though they were supposed to be married, she didn't even know that? He didn't say those words, but Camilla averted her eyes as if he had.

It was true, Camilla truly didn't know much about Alois or his family. He had never shown his face in the capital, after all. Of course, she had heard the bad rumours, but since he had never been on her mind as a candidate for betrothal back then, she had never thought to ask about him at social occasions.

"My family serves as the king's shadow. As members of the branch family, we did the work that the king can't put his seal to, for one reason or another."

It's an old story, one he's grown used to over the years, so Alois simply shrugged. As the meat on his shoulders jiggled, Camilla looked at him bitterly.

“We took on the more under-the-table work of the royal family, not things I would want to talk about. It would be strange for a family like mine to go to social occasions like normal, don’t you think? Of course, things are more peaceful now, so there isn’t quite as much need for shadowy work. But, I suppose it’s more like a tradition nowadays.”

Alois’ father, the previous Lord Montchat, also had a reputation for not appearing much in public. Did Alois have a similar reason for not wanting to appear in the capital?

But, if it’s a tradition... There’s not much she could do about it.

Then, Camilla shook her head furiously. She was this close to being coaxed again. If she was simply satisfied with that, then that meant all her plans had failed completely. Camilla’s ambition to create a proper man out of Alois would have amounted to nothing.

“That’s just ancient history now though, isn’t it?”

Over a hundred years had passed since the last crisis in Sonnenlicht. There had been neither civil strife or a war with a foreign power. There wasn’t even a hint of battles for the succession over the years. Under the King’s wise administration, the kingdom had enjoyed the fruits of peace for many generations.

“That was then, this is now. Lord Alois, your time spent in the shadows should end.”

No matter how much a silhouette resembles a person, it’s all too easy for it to be swallowed up by the shadows that dwarf it. What reason is there for him to hide away in them now when there’s no reason for it?

“So, with that being said, we’re going out. Outside! Get a change of clothes! Anywhere will do!”

“Anywhere, you say?”

“The most important thing is to get you through the door!”

As Camilla said that to affirm it, Alois nodded.

“I see, then let’s go out then, shall we?”

“Even if you use some smooth words with me, you aren’t getting out of it this time! Whenever I try to make you lose weight you always have some sort of excuse...! Wait, what did you just say?”

“Let’s go out. There was some business I was to attend to anyway.”

Camilla blinked as she stared at Alois.

Was he trying to play her for a fool again? The sharp edges of Camilla’s mouth softened just ever so slightly. Perhaps one day they’ll truly smoothen out?

○

The place that they went out to was a manastone mine.

The purpose of the trip was to inspect the site and assess just how successful the operation was. Then, after that, locating new sites. It is done by detecting the magical resonance from manastones deep

inside the swamps. As someone with impressive magical power, Alois was the only one who could do that.

So, simply put, this was work.

Somehow, it was always going to end up like this.

○

The Duchy of Mohnton was vast. It may be a remote region, but the family that ruled this land was still a branch of the royal family, after all. The manastone site was near the northern border of the duchy.

Just a little ways from the mine, there's a huge river. That marked the border with the neighbouring state. By crossing over the movable bridge, you would find yourself in a different country. A long time ago, a war was fought with that nation and forts were erected on both sides of the river, but they've long since been abandoned. Instead, nowadays, the tents of merchants are what line the shores of the river. There was usually such a huge amount of foot traffic from merchants and travelers over the bridge that it very seldom had the opportunity to raise itself. The place that once saw the fires of war was now a cornerstone of international trade.

The manor of the Montchat family was located in the southern part of their territory. It took more than half a day for a carriage to reach the mine from there.

Camilla and Alois, however, rode in different carriages. 'I have no intention of traveling in a carriage with Lord Alois alone,' Camilla didn't say anything selfish like that. Rather, it was simply not physically possible for her to fit alongside him.

Camilla traveled in a two-horse carriage. Meanwhile, Alois' was pulled by four. It was quite easy to judge just how much Alois weighed when you saw that both carriages kept the same pace. And, although they had trotted the exact same distance, Alois' horses looked terribly exhausted compared to the ones that had pulled the other carriage. Those poor things.

○

"Please take a rest here for a while. So long as you don't wander too far, you're welcome to have a look around."

At a residence set up nearby the mine, Alois told Camilla that.

"From here on out, I need to do some work. If I have some spare time once it's over, then perhaps we can spend some of it together?"

"I don't mind, but..."

Camilla frowned.

It only made sense. She had proposed that they go out, but this isn't what she meant at all.

The mining town of Grenze.

The second biggest settlement in the Duchy of Mohnton, behind only the town nearby the Montchat family's main manor.

Although the entire territory was covered in marshes, this area was particularly swampy and filled with miasma. The miners flocked to this town to dig the manastones that were in abundance in these swamps.

Grenze was the greatest source of manastone collection in the duchy. In addition, since it was so close to the border, it was very easy to sell the commodity to foreign merchants.

The town was built in such a way that it surrounded a swamp at its center. The town itself is surrounded by forested marshlands, with the only road running through it leading towards the bridge over the river border.

Since it was such a melting pot, filled with merchants and miners, it was a vibrant place. There were market stalls set up on the main street nearly every day, its vendors hawking all sorts of exotic goods.

The miners are well built and energetic men, though they had a tendency to get a bit boisterous and rowdy. It wasn't just the sound of laughter that echoed through the town. There were often shouting matches and the yells of a fight breaking out. Those kinds of voices could always be heard somewhere in the town.

It was a coarse and rough place, through and through. All that being said, it was still a prosperous town with people from all sorts of different cultures intermingling together, with not much care paid to how people looked. It was the polar opposite to the constant focus on maintaining proper appearance and etiquette in the aristocratic world.

"Lord Alois, I don't think you really took what I said seriously."

"Now now, please don't be mad. When I come back, we'll spend some time outside together."

Outside. Just how much faith can she put in the word 'outside' now? No matter what, it's not going to be the kind of place that Camilla would expect, like a dance hall or a poetry gathering.

"Where are we going to go?"

"...I'm not sure it would be the sort of place you would be interested in, Camilla."

Alois turned to look at Camilla as he prefaced his next words. He gazed into her eyes, as if wondering how they would react.

"It's the orphanage that I spoke to you about before. It's on the edge of town, so I thought I would go and see how they're doing."

"An orphanage, is it?"

Of course, she'd react like this.

Camilla's voice had become quieter than before as she heard it. Seeing her like that, Alois scratched the back of his head worriedly.

"You would find that unpleasant though, yes? It makes sense, there's no way that Camilla would want to go to a place like that, right?"

"I don't find it unpleasant at all, though. Back in the capital, I visited orphanages quite often."

She had no sense of disgust at the idea of visiting a home for orphans.

Such a thing isn't an issue to her at all. It seemed that Alois had misunderstood Camilla's feelings completely. But, he still reacted to the words she had used.

"You visited 'quite often'?"

As Alois looked puzzled, Camilla averted her gaze. It was only after he repeated it that she realized her slip of the tongue.

When living in the capital, Camilla often visited the orphanage alongside a friend of hers. But, because she was a 'noblewoman', she kept these visits an absolute secret. No matter what, she can't let Alois know about it, so she tried to play it off with an 'I didn't mean it like that'.

"Umm... You see, it was an act of noblesse oblige, so I often went to help. S-Since, I like children, after all..."

"Liking children? I see, somehow I thought it might have been something like that."

Alois nodded at Camilla's words, he didn't seem to doubt her at all.

Camilla almost breathed a sigh of relief. Beyond her cooking hobby, 'that side' of her couldn't ever become known.

"Well then, I should be back before nightfall, so shall we head out then?"

She hadn't actually agreed to go with him yet.

But, before the rebellious words in Camilla's heart came forth, Alois continued.

"The truth is, it seems like the elderly woman who runs the orphanage has fallen ill, so that's another part of my reason to visit."

"Oh?"

Going by the story he had told before, the old woman ran the place by herself. Just how strong must that ailment be to keep someone as sturdy as her in bed? And what of the children?

— I'm worried...

Of course, Camilla didn't feel any obligation to visit an old woman who was a complete stranger to her.

But, despite that, she can hardly say 'I won't go' after hearing that sort of story. What kind of person would refusing make her? What's more, she's a little worried about it all.

"...I understand. I shall accompany you."

"Ohh, thank you very much!"

Alois' eyes narrowed as he smiled. In his relief, the flabby skin on his face that had been pulled somewhat taught loosened and sagged.

"I knew that you'd agree to come along. It truly is a great help that you're so honest."

Not suiting his massive body, Alois let out a just a little laugh, exhaling sharply from his nose.

08

After Alois went to work, Camilla was alone.

As soon as she opened the windows for some fresh air, the miasma seeped straight in. Camilla's black hair became frizzy in the humid air and the wind pricked at her skin.

That miasma was definitely harmful to a person's body. From minor pains and irritated skin to frazzled hair and outbreaks of rashes, the effect definitely varied from person to person.

The stronger one's magic is, the more susceptible to the effects of the miasma they are. So, whilst Camilla was definitely irritated, it was nothing compared to what Alois must be going through. What's more, the miasma around Grenze was particularly thick, since it was such a rich source of manastones.

—If you take that into account, it's a wonder that everyone who lives here doesn't look unsightly.

Camilla tilted her head as she looked down at the streets below from the window.

It was another residence that the Montchat family owned in Grenze, where they planned to stay for a few days. From what Camilla could see from her perch, everyone in the town below seemed to look fine.

The main manor back in the south was built on a hill some way away from the town, but the estate in Grenze was practically built in the city center. Because of that, the garden there wasn't nearly as large as the one back at the manor.

Camilla resided in her room on the second floor. Although there's a little distance, she can still make out the faces of the people walking on the pavement below, even picking up threads of conversations here and there.

As she watched the view outside, people watching in an attempt to stave off boredom, she felt an uneasy feeling as she stared at them.

All the people walking along the streets seemed to have beautiful, suntanned skin. The only people who seemed to be struggling with skin issues were the young foreign merchants she saw sometimes as she watched, who must still be new to travelling.

Although Mohnton may be flourishing in trade, it was hardly a sightseeing destination. This dark land where only merchants dare tread, there were all sorts of stories told about it in the capital.

For example, that every person who dwelled there had a face as ugly as Alois'. That when your skin was exposed to miasma, it would break out in hives and fester. Every person who ever returned from Mohnton had become almost froglike in appearance.

Since Alois was the only representative from Mohnton that many people saw in the capital, the prejudice only grew fiercer. Camilla didn't believe in the rumours wholeheartedly, but she definitely thought something along those lines was the truth.

So, this was truly a bewildering sight to her.

—So, why is it only that person whose skin gets so bad?

Was it because his magical power was too strong or that his skin was too weak? Or, another reason entirely? He was a difficult man to figure out.

For Camilla, who was attempting to make this man to her liking, that same man was laying a difficult road before her. Whether it was in regards to his poor skin or his excess weight, Camilla hadn't had any success at all so far with either.

—He won't exercise, he won't reduce his meals, he keeps eating nothing but greasy and sugary foods...

Even if she managed to get him out of the house, they're still in his territory. No matter how much she pushed, Alois didn't seem to budge. Every idea she had hatched failed miserably.

—Just why aren't things going to plan?

Not knowing the answer to that question, Camilla sighed. As she looked at the ground in dejection, Camilla realized something, shaking her head vigorously.

"A month has not even passed yet...!!"

It's too early to be depressed. She knew that this was going to be a long road. Camilla was willing to walk over hot coals if it meant that she could see the tears of those people in the capital one day.

"That said, he's the one who wants to get married, so shouldn't he be trying to lose weight? In that case, why is he being so difficult!? He should try to do something about this himself!!"

Drumming her fingers on her sullen cheeks, Camilla closed her eyes. Then, after taking a deep breath, raised her face.

As her eyes opened, she saw the beautiful colours of a sunny sky. From that lively town of Grenze, the wind blew through the window.

The wind may have been damp with that irritating miasma, but it carried a slightly refreshing early autumn chill with it.

"It's because I'm cooped up here all alone that I am feeling depressed like this!"

Alois won't be back for a while. Meanwhile, this room felt dark and damp with the stagnant and humid air.

So, Camilla decided that she would go outside.

It would be a much more pleasant change of pace than simply waiting alone for Alois in her room.

○

She wanted to take a tour around town with a maid as a guide.

But, when she looked for a maid, she couldn't catch anyone.

'I'm busy' or 'I have something to do', she was always refused with lines like that. Even when she spoke with a maid who seemed to be free, she would get the same excuses. Saying that they had scheduled work after that, Camilla could understand.

But, it was still irritating to her to simply slink back to her room. Camilla kept walking around the mansion, busily chatting to every maid she could find.

○

“Hey, did you hear? That rumoured villainess, she’s staying in this house now.”

“I heard, I heard. She demanded to go out somewhere, or something like that.”

“The master really intends to marry someone like that, huh? He should really reconsider.”

The estate’s first floor. The room in the north wing is used as a break room for the maids and other female servants.

When she stopped outside the room where she was hoping to find a maid with some free time, Camilla heard happily gossiping voices from inside. Looking through the gap in the slightly ajar door, she saw three maids chatting to one another.

“She really does have such a dreadfully mean looking face though, doesn’t she? Did you see it?”

“I saw it. She actually spoke with me just before. Saying that she wanted to go outside, trying to make me go with her.”

“No way~! So, what happened?”

“I refused, of course. I told her that I was too busy. If I walked outside with a woman like that, everyone would look at me like I was mad.”

Camilla remembered one of their faces.

A young girl who was quite slight, whose brown hair was raised high in a braid. She must have been slightly younger than Camilla? She seemed meek and frail at first glance, but she talked with the other maids in quite a dignified way.

It’s hard to believe it was the same girl who had lowered her heard and talked in a tone barely more than a whisper when Camilla had called out to her earlier.

“Oh, you’re awful. Isn’t she going to be the master’s wife some day? It won’t be a laughing matter if she found out.”

“Even though you always come here to skip work.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I am not skipping work. Since I’ve finished early, I’m simply taking a break.”

As she said that, the maids giggled to eachother.

They don’t seem to have noticed Camilla, standing just outside the door.

——Just, what...

Her excitement at the thought of touring the town had completely cooled. In fact, it felt like all the blood in her body had chilled.

But, that cold sensation only lasted a moment. Straight away, another emotion began to boil to the surface. Her shoulders stiffened and her fingers trembled.

Camilla grit her teeth, suppressed her quivering fingers, then grasped the handle of the door with a vice-like grip.

09

As she burst through the door, those three maids who were happily chatting turned with a start to look at Camilla, their eyes opened wide. It was as if the conversation they were having up until that point hadn't taken place at all, the room had fallen that quiet. You couldn't even hear them breathe.

"Prepare my clothes to go out and act as my guides. Do you know what time Lord Alois is coming back? We should return before he does."

The three maids looked at each other. Camilla felt herself growing annoyed with just how frightened they seemed. They had no problem saying whatever they pleased just a moment ago, so why is that they're suddenly so mute in front of the person in question?

"U-Umm... Do you mean all three of us?"

After a silence, one of the maids asked with a trembling voice. She didn't look at Camilla, only at the other maids. She was constantly blinking and shifting on the spot.

"Is there some problem?"

Whenever Camilla said anything, silence smothered the room. The three maids kept looking at each other in cowed silence, then the same maid that spoke before opened her mouth first. It wasn't the small maid that Camilla had called out to before. It was the slender, slightly tall maid, who seemed to be the eldest of the group.

"Umm, well, we're doing some other work now..."

Right? She nudged the shoulder of the maid next to her, who nodded in a hurry.

"T-That's right, there's a lot of things we have to do before the Master comes back."

"I-I'm very sorry, b-but you'll have to find another person..."

"You're working right now?"

Camilla sighed, exasperated. Utterly barefaced lies. Did they even remember what they had been saying up until she walked in?

"I wonder why you would come to the break room in order to work, is what I'd like to ask you most of all!"

Camilla shifted her glare towards the small maid, who was trying to hide behind the back of her older friend. A short girl, with brown hair like a bay. As soon as Camilla caught her eyes, she began to tremble.

".....D-Do you mean me?"

She shook terribly as she asked her that as if she were a small animal. What's more, her short height, childish features and black eyes only enhanced that image.

"After refusing to assist me, here you are in a place like this. Do you really hate the idea of walking with me that much?"

“N-No.... Umm...”

“She was just taking a short break before going to her next job. Isn’t that right?”

One of the other maids stepped in to protect her as she began to falter. It wasn’t the older maid either. She was slightly chubby but had a charming looking face.

“So, it’s already time to get going to our next job, alright? So, we’re very sorry, Mistre- Lady Camilla, but we have to be going. Because we’re awfully busy, we’ll excuse ourselves now.”

As the chubby maid said that, she winked at the other two. “Please excuse us,” the other two said, bowing as they took the hint from their friend and set off towards the door.

“Stop right there.”

The three of them didn’t listen to Camilla’s order at all, leaving the room as quickly as they could. They intended to just run away like that.

But, they didn’t notice that Camilla kept walking after them.

As they kept walking, unaware, the two older maids tried to cheer up the younger one between them.

“Hey, are you alright?”

“She’s just awful, eavesdropping on us like that. So despicable...”

“She’s really a horrible woman, just like the rumours said. Don’t worry, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Honestly, you would have probably had a rougher time if you hadn’t refused her.”

Walking in between the two other maids who consoled her, the shorter girl didn’t say anything.

—————I can still hear everything you are saying!

They think they’re going to escape like this? Camilla thought that to herself.

The maids were about to round the corner. Just before they passed out of her sight, Camilla raised her voice.

“Stop right there!”

They were deep into the estate, with all sorts of hustle and bustle about. The sudden scene involving the three maids drew the eyes of plenty of servants who were coming and going. As people gathered around, Camilla’s voice cut through the air like a knife.

“I did not give you my permission to leave! Stop at once!”

The three maids stopped in their tracks, turning around to look at Camilla. Drawing closer together, the three of them exchanged frightened glances.

As they huddled together, Camilla approached them in an angry stride. Camilla wasn’t an especially tall girl, but when she stood in contrast to those trembling maids, that intimidating atmosphere made her look like the biggest person in the room.

“Who are you calling despicable!? Aren’t you the ones speaking poorly of me behind my back, like I can’t hear you!?”

“N-No, we didn’t mean it like that...”

The older maid spoke first. The plump maid couldn’t speak because of how sudden this situation was, whilst the smallest of them simply looked at her feet, her shoulders shaking.

“Then, what exactly did you mean? And did you not hear what I was saying before? Do you have some kind of excuse to be skipping work?”

“That’s...”

“Do you have something to say for yourself? By all means, do so!”

As Camilla glowered at them thunderously, the maids fell silent. The older maid looked at the growing group of people watching, whilst the chubby maid was doing her best not to meet Camilla’s gaze. That attitude, as if they were just waiting for the storm to pass, only made Camilla more incensed.

“Why are you suddenly falling so silent!? Don’t you have something to say!? Did you three suddenly forget how to talk!?”

She’s furious. Utterly enraged with these three who are suddenly so quiet. All they had to do was say something and it could have done something to calm Camilla down.

“Say something! If you don’t, I won’t hesitate to tell Lord Alois all about this! You’ll be out on your ear!!”

“.....no”

A small whisper was almost drowned out by Camilla’s bellowing.

It was the small maid who spoke in such a quiet voice. Where were the two maids who were supposed to be supporting her? She looked around anxiously, hugging her shoulders with her hands.

“Don’t...”

Her small voice trembled.

“If all you’re going to say is ‘don’t’, I can’t understand you. If you have something to say, why don’t you say it?”

As Camilla spoke sharply, the maid raised her fear stricken face. That face like a small animal looked terrified, her eyes wet with tears.

She opened her mouth to say something, but the words caught as a lump in her throat. She breathed out two or three times as she tried to talk, but no words ever came out, the tears in her eyes welling up more and more.

They began to streak down her face. She turned her face back towards the floor, trying to hide her tears.

“Are you okay?”

“You alright?”

The two maids tried to comfort her. They spoke soft words and soothed the sobbing little maid. Then, the whispers began to stir around them.

To think she'd be shouted at like that. She went too far. That poor thing———.

———Liselotte!

Her blood boiled as she saw red. It was the day of the ball. Camilla had driven Liselotte to tears. Her beautiful brown hair tied in a braid, at the time that girl had collapsed to the floor, weeping as she stared at the ground. As countless eyes in that ballroom had watched the scene, it was only Camilla who noticed it...

In a way that only Camilla could see, Liselotte had curled her mouth up into a grin.

“——Don't think you can buy my sympathy with that display, tears are a cheap thing.”

It isn't Liselotte in front of her now.

Unlike her, this isn't an opponent who can stand up to the power of Camilla's fury. She wasn't that girl, who was so determined, flexible and uncompromising in her goals.

This time, she's only against a maid. No matter how small and sly she might be, a girl with a weak mind like this can't say anything when faced with a person like her. There was no ulterior motive in her tears, she was simply sobbing out of true fear of Camilla.

Even if Camilla knew that, it didn't settle down the feelings raging in her heart.

“If you wish to cry, then cry. But, don't expect me to simply turn around and forgive you with just that!”

The crowd stared at Camilla. Then, she began to hear a voice near the back. It was one of the senior servants, drawn over by all the commotion. But still, Camilla didn't hold back, taking another step towards the maid.

The maids wanted to draw back, but they were frozen to the spot. Camilla continued striding forward without paying any mind to it, even when the senior servant tried to get in between them.

“You...”

Please calm down! Someone said, as they caught Camilla's arm. That servant had stepped in between her and the maids to protect them.

“You three, can't you say even a single word of apology to me!?”

“Please calm down, Lady Camilla!”

Camilla's words, shouted out with passion, were, in turn, drowned out by the yell of the servant.

“Please calm down!”, the servant said again as they pulled Camilla away from the maids she seemed threatening to grab at any moment as if those were the only words he knew.

As Camilla was held back by that servant, the maids quickly disappeared into the crowd.

Camilla's rage still hadn't burned away and as she watched the maids disappear, all the servants around her stared at her with suspicious gazes.

10

Camilla was politely, but firmly, ushered back to her room.

“Please remain calm until the Master returns.”

Although they said that, the passion burning in Camilla’s heart didn’t cool down at all as she was confined to her room.

Being alone in that room, all she could do was dwell on what just happened.

“Ahhhhhhh! So frustrating!!”

After all, those maids that had insulted Camilla didn’t apologize at all. Crying and garnering sympathy from all the onlookers, making it seem like Camilla was the villain, it was just like what Liselotte used to do. Whether that maid did it on purpose or not was irrelevant to the vilified Camilla.

“That’s the kind of person I hate the most! If you have something to say to me, you ought to say it to my face! You wait, I will definitely have you say it!”

She won’t demand they be fired. If they were to simply disappear, Camilla wouldn’t be able to feel a sense of satisfaction later, it would be like they had simply escaped. It would be more satisfying for Camilla to have them bow and scrape in front of her as an apology after a thorough scolding.

“And what’s more, all those people in the crowd! All of them sympathizing with her! Don’t they know who I am!? There’s a lack of education around here!”

There wasn’t any use for her hands that trembled in anger all alone in this room, so she unfurled her fists as she stood up. She couldn’t just sit idly either, as she paced back and forth.

“Always just calling me a villain without even knowing me...!!”

Jeez! She slammed the wall next to her, sighing breathlessly.

“Well, take a good look! I don’t want your sympathy! Because I’ll be the one looking down on you one day!!”

Instead of sympathy, Camilla wanted people to look at her with envy. She wanted all of the people who drove her to frustration to feel the same regret that she had. They would be the pathetic looking ones this time.

——And as for that maid, I will absolutely get her to bow her head and say ‘Camilla is wonderful!’, just you wait and see!

○

As the sun began to dip toward the horizon and the sky blushed pink, Alois returned to the estate.

Camilla, of course, wouldn’t be content to just wait quietly in her room. She raced out of the door, determined to be the first to talk to him.

After arriving, he would probably go to his room on the second floor. Alois' room is on the opposite side of the floor, separated from Camilla's room by a hallway and the stairwell. Therefore, if she waited near the top of the stairs, she might get the opportunity to talk to Alois first.

As the Master returned home, the estate bustled into life. She could hear the sounds of servants rushing about downstairs. That way, since there's barely anyone working on the second floor now, there's no one to stop Camilla from doing as she pleased. Thanks to that, Camilla could reach the stairs without anyone spotting her.

Alois, meanwhile, was heading for his room whilst being surrounded by servants. Camilla arrived just in time to see him from behind. Neither Alois, nor the servants around him, seemed to be aware that Camilla was behind them.

Camilla strode towards Alois, and was going to call out to him.

"Lord Alois—"

"Master, have you heard about what that woman did? She drove a maid to tears with her threats and even tried to grab her.

But, Camilla stopped dead on her feet. She heard the butler's words as he took Alois' coat.

"I won't forgive you, even if you cry', she said something like that to that poor little maid who didn't even say a word, I can attest to it. She was treating that meek young girl like she was condemning some sort of criminal. She really is just as bad as the rumours say, after all."

The crowd around Alois was beginning to thin. But, she still heard that conversation perfectly.

Alois, who had a plodding gait with that big body of his, scratched his chin at this troubling news as he grasped what he had been told.

"...That is a problem. I'll hear what the maid has to say about it."

"The maids aside, Master, do you really intend to marry such a woman? Even if it was what Prince Julian said, since she's such a distasteful woman, surely you have the right to refuse?"

"It makes me feel sorry for her when you say things like that."

He let out a sigh mixed with a pained laugh as he replied to his butler.

"If I didn't take her in, she wouldn't have anywhere else to go. She was in such a miserable state. From time to time she may make you angry, but I hope you can tolerate it for me."

Alois' words were dyed with sympathy. Those words defending Camilla were a reflection of his charitable heart.

"Besides, she may be loud at times, but she's easy to handle if you know what to say. She's quite an honest person at heart and I'm sure she'll change as she gets used to living here."

"Master, you're far too kind." The butler's voice became faint. As Camilla stood still, Alois and his servant walked out of earshot. But, she didn't feel like chasing after him anymore.

—What did he say?

The words that Alois used kept repeating in her mind.

Feel sorry for her. Miserable.

— I'm being pitied.

Camilla unconsciously gripped the handrail as her legs lost strength. It felt like she might fall over at any moment. Her vision became cloudier every time she blinked.

— It was all meaningless.

All Alois had done was 'take in' the hated Camilla, who would have otherwise been exiled from the kingdom. That kind-hearted lord who, no matter what Camilla would do, would simply 'tolerate' it.

Him saying that he wanted to marry her was a lie. Him saying that he wanted to lose weight was all a lie. It was all just to satisfy Camilla's towering pride. He tolerated whatever she did, never getting angry or denying Camilla's harsh words, always just smiling.

“.....Making a fool out of me.”

— Even though you're just a toad. Even though you're such a detested man. Even though you're so ugly that no one would ever marry you.

Yet, even a man like that was in a position to marry Camilla out of pity.

Camilla bit her lip.

Then, almost reflexively, Camilla slapped her trembling legs into action and escaped that mansion without a second thought.

11

– I’m so mad!

As Camilla stomped down those cobbled streets, she paid no heed to where she was going.

– How! Dare! They!

Even though her head is burning with anger, the cold air still bit at her skin. But as that rage twinkled in her eyes, Camilla’s body kept on moving.

After rushing out of the mansion, she just went wherever her feet took her. Although the colour of the sky became ever darker, Camilla kept going.

The late evening sun sunk towards the horizon quickly, as the shadows of the town stretched ever longer. Businesses that remained shuttered during the day opened up for business, with many ruddy-faced men lining up outside. Women in exotic and titillating outfits called out to entice various merchants and miners who passed by to come inside.

The streetlamps set up around the city flickered to life as the evening passed into night. The bright lights they emitted weren’t burned from oil or gas, but took their power from the manastones they used as a battery. These lamps were lit using the refuse manastones that weren’t seen as fit for export.

Was it the light of the manastone that signaled the beginning of the town’s nightlife? Unlike during the day time, the town took on a more seedy vibrancy than during the day time.

In a place like this, a girl like Camilla inevitably stood out. Wearing a high-class dress, with her hair ornately tied up and with various pieces of jewelry like valuable necklaces and earrings.

Surprised to see a noblewoman in a place like this, people inevitably turned to look at her. But, they quickly looked the other way in a panic when they saw her thunderous face.

– That man! Just who do you think you’re pitying!?

As those emotions swirled around in her chest, she didn’t keep track of just how far she walked. She had no idea just where in this town she was either. Although she’s walked for so long, it seems like she keeps seeing the same sights over and over. Of course, she has no idea how to get back either.

– I will definitely pay you all back!

But, how?

Even the possibility of making Alois slim down was impossible now.

-Even still!

Camilla’s yelled back at that doubtful voice in her heart. She won’t lose. This much won’t bring her down.

As she etched that in her mind, she kept striding down the road.

“Oww!”

And, as she went, something brought Camilla to an unintended stop.

Something had run into her, just a little below her chest. Despite yelling that out, it hadn't really hurt her, instead her bubbling anger was more to do with someone stopping her in the first place.

"Why are you just standing about idly like that!?"

Camilla knew what had bumped into her straight away. Right in front of her, there was a confused looking boy. Perhaps, about 12 years old? He had a patch on his pants and his shirt looked worn out. It was plain to see that he hadn't been living an affluent life.

"What, aren't you just a child!? Why are you out so late!?"

"....What the hell, why are you just bumping into people like that!"

When he first saw Camilla's angry face, the boy had stiffened up as if he were frightened. But, that only lasted an instant. He suddenly became rather cheeky, talking back to Camilla.

"Are you a bad kid!? If you know your way home, go back there!"

"Haa!? Aren't you the one who's lost!?"

"That's wrong!"

The boy and Camilla yelled back and forth under the incandescent magical light. But, the boy's face that became red from all the yelling seemed to be a little exhausted looking.

"You should at least know where you live! But, as for me, I can't go home...!"

"You really are lost then!"

"I told you, that you're wrong!!"

As the boy yelled that from the depths of his belly, he suddenly sighed deeply. Then, he suddenly looked at Camilla with a serious face, the girl he had looked down on as been lost.

"Well, whatever. Can you help me for a bit?"

"Ha? I don't have any money."

"What do you think I am!?"

She thought that he was a young beggar and assumed he was going to badger her for money. But, right now, Camilla doesn't have a single coin on her. If you sold her ornaments and jewelry, one would probably fetch a fair price, but she was hardly going to part with those things.

"You're such a weird person! I just want to ask for some help! The truth is, I was actually going to go ask Lord Alois, but...!"

"Ha?"

At that unexpected name, Camilla's mouth hung open.

"The old lady collapsed on her way to Lord Alois' place. I want to help her, but no one believes me and even if I went to see Lord Alois the servants would just kick me out..."

“Fell down... That’s a real problem!”

On the way to the estate, she fell by the roadside?

She looked around in wonder, but she couldn’t see anyone like that. Instead, all she could see were people watching her talking with the boy, with expressions that seemed to say ‘what a pity’.

– What kind of expression is that...?

Camilla couldn’t quite understand. As she looked puzzled, a kind natured person spoke out to Camilla.

“Oi, you better not get too close to that kid, young miss.”

“...Why is that?”

“That boy is infamous around here. He’ll coax people in with his lies and then fleece them. Everyone in town knows about him.”

As he said that, the people nearby began to murmur. “I heard he used the ‘my mother has a sudden illness’ lie three times in a row.” “Last time, he said that his sister was dying, even though he has no family.” “It’s all just a trick to get people into an alleyway. It makes it easier for him to escape afterwards.”

As she listened to those people talk, Camilla glanced at the boy. As she looked down, all Camilla could see was the boy who was staring at his feet with clenched fists.

“He was trying to lure people in for a while now, but you’re the only one who paid any attention to him. Everyone around here knows not to get involved with that boy.”

As he laughed, someone nearby said that. It made perfect sense. The reason why he decided to call out to such an out-of-place person like Camilla is that no one else would give him the time of day.

“Are you a pickpocket? You’re the worst.”

“...This is different!”

As Camilla muttered those words, the boy cried out in frustration.

“I’ve never done that since the old lady took me in! It’s the truth...! I just need help to bring her home... Please help me!!”

Tears were beginning to form at the edges of his bloodshot eyes. But, the boy bit his lip and forced them back.

That expression was familiar. It was like the one that she had not too long ago.

“.....Well, fine. I understand.”

Camilla nodded as she looked at the boy for a time. As she said that she would help him, Camilla was reflected in the round eyes of surprise the boy looked at her with.

“Oi oi, are you serious? This kid is a well known liar, you know.”

Someone interjected as they watched Camilla agree to help. But, without even turning to face the direction of the voice, Camilla found her words.

“So far, this child hasn’t yet told me a falsehood. Whether or not this child is a liar or not is not something that I know about. Therefore, for the time being, I shall believe him. Where is this old woman?”

“...Really? You really believe me!?”

“For now. If it turns out that you were lying to me, be ready for the consequences.”

The boy nodded vigorously. She heard a laughing voice say ‘that’s so pitiful’, but Camilla ignored it completely.

“The old lady has been really sick recently... But, there’s medicine back at the house! Right now she’s resting in a back alley! I’ll take you there!!”

The boy grasped Camilla’s hand, trying to hurry her along. Camilla ran with light footsteps, following the boy’s lead.

She knows that what she’s doing is reckless. Even Camilla would usually have hesitated in doing something like this.

But, Camilla had noticed it.

From the boy’s hair, there was just the faintest scent of cookie dough.

12

Later that night, an old woman groaned softly as she narrowly opened her eyes.

As she looked around to check where she was, she blinked. It wasn't just the firm bed she lay on that felt familiar, but the ceiling she looked up at as well. Then, she felt the warmth and heard the crackle of a nearby fireplace.

She realized straight away that she was in her own room.

The last thing that old woman remembered, she should have been out in the town. She was with one of the older boys in the house to buy food, since the lord would be coming around that night.

It was on the way back that it happened. After finishing their shopping, she had felt a sudden bout of nausea and couldn't move.

That boy had tried to make the old woman as comfortable as possible in a back alley as he ran to get help, him calling out to people passing by was the last thing she remembered.

She had no idea what happened after that.

How on earth did she get back here?

As her eyes moved around the room, she could see the figures of those familiar children illuminated by the flickering lights of the fire... As well as a young lady she had never seen before. They were all looking at the old woman with worry.

But, as soon as they realized that she had woken up, they all looked relieved.

The room where everyone had been anxiously holding their breath suddenly erupted into noise.

○

"I told you that everything would be fine! You really did not trust me at all, did you!?"

"But that's because you didn't even know which medicine to use and then you made her a weird drink! Also, you made me carry her the most!"

"You should be thanking me for even helping at all! When you were just crying all by yourself, how were you ever going to bring her back!?"

"I wasn't crying!!"

In that old and tiny room, Camilla and the young boy were arguing back and forth again.

But, even though the room was so small, it was crammed full of children who were watching over the old woman as she woke up. There must have been at least ten of them. Out of relief for the old woman, some of them were crying happily. But, the shouting match between those two was overpowering those sounds completely.

"In the first place, why would I simply be carrying the right medicines on hand!? We hardly had the time to go and buy more medicine either!?"

“...That’s right...!”

The boy opened his eyes wide in shock. He hadn’t noticed until now.

“You know, you seem like a bad guy, but you’re surprisingly smart...”

“Are you trying to make a fool out of me!?”

Camilla’s shoulders stiffened unintentionally. When she was about to continue fighting with the boy, she suddenly heard a hoarse voice beside her that interjected.

“Excuse me... Who are you...? Did you bring me here?”

As the old woman raised herself up in her bed, she stared at Camilla and the young boy with confusion. She still seemed weak, her face was pale.

“Ah, granny, this person didn’t help at all!”

Before Camilla could answer, the boy leaned forward onto the bed and said that.

“Although she said she’d help out, she made me do all the carrying! She didn’t even know where to go either and she’s got a really awful mouth!”

The boy’s words weren’t exactly untrue. The old woman may have been frail and thin, but it was still impossible for Camilla to carry her on her back. Through a mixture of supporting her by the shoulders between them, and sometimes having the boy carrying her on his back, they had somehow made it back.

She didn’t know the way, either. The old woman’s house was located on the eave of the forest, far away from the main streets of the town, a place where the manastone powered lamps didn’t reach. She had to rely on the boy’s guidance, with only the moon for light. The boy had gotten annoyed at Camilla and called her useless, whilst Camilla had yelled back at him in turn. Just like that, bickering the whole way, they had managed to make it back to that old house despite everything.

“It was like I had to do everything myself!”

After she listened to the boy’s story, the old woman looked up at Camilla. Then, lowered her head, bowing as low as she could in the bed.

“I’m sorry. We must have caused you a lot of trouble. I was saved by your generosity.”

“Do not mention it. I really did not do much.”

As Camilla said that, the boy suddenly yelled “See!” as if that proved his point. But, as he raised his voice, it suddenly turned into a yelp of “GEH!”.

The old woman smacked the boy upside the head. Her strike wasn’t painful, weak as she was, but it had the effect of silencing the boy.

“Is that any way to talk about the person that saved me?”

“...But, actually...”

“‘Actually’ nothing. Without her, I wouldn’t have gotten back safely. Don’t you have something you ought to say?”

The boy pouted something fierce. Although he seemed awfully unsatisfied with it, he still meekly obeyed the old woman. Turning to Camilla, he lowered his head.

“.....Thank you very much.”

“My, aren’t you obedient? Fufu~.”

Camilla said that with a smile. Then, she reached out a hand to touch the head of that young boy in front of her, petting his dirty blond hair.



“You really were telling the truth. Because you called out so earnestly, you saved your grandmother, you truly did well.”

“...Don’t treat me like a kid! Stop acting so important!”

“Well, I really was... Until a short while ago.”

A count’s daughter. A future wife to a duke. A much better position than some commoner living on the outskirts of town. At least, that’s how Camilla had thought of herself.

But, not anymore. Right now, Camilla is nothing more than a pitiful girl with nowhere to call home. Her marriage with Alois who shows no intention of losing weight seems like a distant thing, in other words, she can hardly call herself ‘the duke’s wife’. To the boy who yelled “Don’t lie!”, Camilla smiled with self-derision.

“If you’re so important, then why are you just wandering around all by yourself!?”

“Why not? There are plenty of reasons.”

“That sounds like the kind of thing someone who ran away from home would say. Hey, you, do you actually have no place to go?”

The boy looked straight through Camilla as if he knew it. At that sudden unexpected perception, she averted her gaze.

“If you don’t have anywhere to go, you can- GEH!”

The boy was about to keep going, but he yelped again. Smacked for the second time.

“Don’t say something rude. You should know a noble when you see one.”

The boy looked towards the old woman with begrudging eyes. Camilla, meanwhile, was just happy to escape the interrogation.

Not knowing what Camilla was thinking, the old woman called out to her.

“Are you staying somewhere in town? I’m sure there are people worried about you. I’d like to help you get back to town straight away, but I can’t move and the children are too young...”

“Do not worry about it...”

There aren’t any people like that for her in the first place.

Not the maids and certainly not Alois. Her parents and former followers back in the capital surely had no idea what Camilla’s current state was, nor would they care.

As she bit her quivering lip, one of the children tugged lightly on Camilla’s dress with an open mouth.

As she looked, Camilla saw a young girl of about five or six years old looking back at her. The girl blinked a couple of times, her big doe eyes looking up like a baby animal.

“I’m hungry...”

As if on cue, the girl's stomach rumbled softly. But, before Camilla could answer, another hand tugged at her dress.

"I gotta go..."

"Huh?"

"I'm thirsty..."

"Wait, wait just a moment!"

"UWAAAAAAAAAH, big brother kicked me!"

The children's voices suddenly burst forth as if a dam had collapsed. Whether it was simply the release of tension when they saw that the old woman was okay, or if they had reached the limits of their patience, Camilla had no idea as she was tugged this way and that by their little hands.

– S-Should I deal with the restroom problem first? Ah, but, those two are fighting... Ahh, jeez! Let go of me!

She couldn't think straight because of all the crying voices in the room.

The old woman tries to tell them to calm down from the bed, but it does little to the cacophony of those ten children. As the boy who had helped carry the old woman back yelled at them all to shut up, it only increased the level of noise.

She couldn't keep track of what was going on as she was pulled left and right.

And, as if misfortune sought company, there was suddenly a loud knock on that old house's door.

After a few raps on the door, whoever was knocking must have realized that there was no one coming to open it.

"Excuse me, I'm coming in."

A familiar voice sounded out as that person entered through the door without an invitation.

Straight away, the whole house shook at the jolt of those footsteps... As if there were an earthquake.

13

Those heavy footsteps stopped in front of the door to the room Camilla was in.

“Please excuse my rudeness.”

He said those words as the door opened.

The person she expected to see suddenly came into view ——— It was Alois, breathing heavily and dripping in sweat. He had a fierce expression that she had never seen on his face before as he stepped into the room.

The children were cowed into silence by the sudden change in atmosphere. The uproar died down to nothing in an instant. The children clammed up as they hid behind Camilla. Even the boisterous young boy and the old woman were silent as he entered, their eyes wide open in shock.

Alois ignored them all and walked straight to Camilla. As he looked at her, he struggled hard to regain his breath, inhaling and exhaling deeply, interrupted by coughs. Then, he closed his eyes, taking a final deep breath.

But, that hardly seemed to settle down Alois’ feelings. When he opened his eyes again, they were incensed with anger.

“.....You are...”

Camilla’s shoulders jolted in surprise as Alois spoke in a low voice she had never heard him use before. It seemed calm, but the anger bubbling beneath his words was easy to hear.

“You are the kind of person who just runs out into the middle of the night without telling a soul, is that it?”

A single woman walking the streets at night alone. They would either have to be a fool or a harlot. As she realized the implication behind those stinging words, Camilla raised her face.

But when she looked up to scowl at Alois, she was only met by his cold glare.

“Do you understand just how much of an uproar there was when we couldn’t find you in your room? I’ve sent all the servants in the mansion around town to look everywhere for you.”

Alois had promised to go with her to the orphanage when he returned. He was probably the first one to notice that Camilla was gone when he came to take her along. There were many people who saw Camilla’s exchange with that young boy. After hearing the story from those onlookers, he could easily deduce where Camilla had gone.

“There are a lot of shadowy places in this town and it isn’t safe at all. It’s a wonder that you weren’t kidnapped off the street. I thought you would have at least some sense about you, but I suppose I was wrong for not expressly telling you.”

“Ah, Lord Alois, please wait a moment...! This girl, she...!”

As Alois coldly reprimanded Camilla, the old woman in the bed tried to intervene. She wanted to protect Camilla. But, her brave action was cut short by Alois' icy words.

"Old lady, this is an issue between Camilla and I. I am aware that I am intruding in your home and I hope you can bear my unreasonable request, but would you please remain silent for now?"

Despite the words being polite, the connotations felt anything but. The old woman couldn't press him any further and lowered her head, staying silent.

"Camilla, I did everything I could to make sure that you had everything you needed. But, from the beginning, you only ever complained."

"...What are you..."

"Yet still you selfishly took off in the middle of the night, without caring about just how much trouble you caused myself and my household, and whilst I was worried about you here you are having fun in a place like this."

"Having fun... What are you...!?"

Camilla squeezed her fists and spat out those words.

"I'm exhausted', is that what you're going to say next!? Even though you truly don't care at all!? Why exactly do you think I was on the streets all alone!?"

Simply setting her up to live her days like a doll in a dollhouse, how is that providing her with everything she needed? Just what was Camilla to Alois?

Camilla couldn't bear her feelings been so thoroughly trampled on.

"I wanted to go out, so why could I not simply go out!? The only reason I am here is that I was trying to help!!"

"It isn't your place to be helping people like this. You should have called someone for help yourself."

"But, I...! I was asked for help? How could I simply leave them be!?"

"Go back to the mansion and fetch a servant. If you had done that, at the very least, I wouldn't have had to run through town searching for you."

Camilla bit her lip.

Alois wasn't wrong. After being asked for help, the best thing she could have done was obediently return to the mansion. That way, it would have been easier to get the old woman home. There would have been an appropriate response straight away.

It just wasn't something that even crossed her mind at the time. Although the boy wouldn't have gotten any help from the estate alone, it would have been different if Camilla was with him. But, Camilla didn't make that choice. Because of her anger, her frustration and, most of all, her pride.

"W-Wait, Lord Alois! She...! She really did help me! And back then, I didn't know that she was acquainted with Lord Alois...!!"

As Camilla was lost for words, the boy jumped in front of her with a panicky voice. The boy tried to hide Camilla behind his back, looking up at Alois with a pale face.

“Don’t get mad at her, she didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Rolf, that isn’t the issue here. Stay silent.”

At Alois’ rumbling voice, the boy named Rolf trembled slightly, but still stood his ground.

“N-No! I won’t stay quiet!”

“Wait, stop being rash!”

As Rolf squared his shoulders, Camilla tried to stop him. Alois is well known as a charitable and kind lord. But, a lord he remains. With a single word, he could have anyone who opposed him exiled from Mohnton.

And right now, it doesn’t seem like Alois is his usual calm self. It must have taken great courage to talk back to him like this.

“...Because everyone thinks I’m a liar, no one helped me even though I begged.”

The boy’s lips trembled, but he didn’t stop talking.

“Everyone in town thinks of me as a bad kid. I know it. Even if granny really collapsed, no one believed me at all. But still...! But still, she was the only one stupid enough to help me...! There wasn’t anyone else that could help!!”



As Rolf shouted so quickly his words became a blur, he pointed at Camilla. Alois kept looking down at that small boy, as his expression didn't change. If you combined both the difference in status and stature, Rolf was standing up to an intense atmosphere of intimidation.

"If it wasn't for her, granny would still be lying in a back alley. I owe her...!"

Alois stayed silent. He still looked down at Rolf. Rolf, meanwhile, refused to back down. As neither of them blinked, silence blanketed the room.

All that could be heard was the sound of the crackling fireplace. Those flames burned as hot as the flaring passions at play. There was the hoot of an owl in the trees. The silence felt like it would go on forever.

Then, that tense atmosphere was interrupted by the sudden tiny sound coming from a young child's stomach.

Alois and Rolf turned to look at the source of the disturbance at the same time. They weren't the only ones. Everyone in the room couldn't help but look.

The culprit was a young girl, hiding behind Camilla's skirt. The first child who had piped up to say she was hungry before.

The girl looked confused when everyone had turned to look at her, then after a moment, she looked down and slowly moved a hand to her belly. When her face turned back up, her eyes were welling with tears.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! I'M HUNGRRRRRYYYYY!!"

Was it truly just hunger? Or could she no longer stand that fierce atmosphere that had engulfed the room? Either way, the girl burst into tears. Alois rubbed the back of his head as Rolf let out the breath he had been holding that whole time. As if it was contagious, the other children began to cry one after the other.

"Hey, just endure it! Today is different than usual! Since granny needs to sleep, there isn't going to be any dinner!"

"Nooo!"

As Rolf tried to calm down the situation with an embarrassed look on his face, the girl shook her head side to side through her tears. Instead of being quiet, she actually shouted over Rolf.

"No no no no! I'm hungry!"

"Stop being so selfish! Can't you little kids just calm down or something!?"

"Noooo!! Both the lord and big bro are scary!!"

The girl's cries echoed through the room. Far from getting her to stop, Rolf only made the girl cry even louder and although the old woman tried to do something, she could barely move from her bed and her voice only came out as a cough. Alois didn't know what to do as he stared at the ceiling.

Camilla, meanwhile, let out a sigh as she rubbed the crease between her eyebrows.

After taking a deep breath, she made her decision.

“...Alright.”

Camilla didn't cry or shout that word. But, her voice still pierced through the din of that noisy room.

“I will prepare something for you to eat. Now, stop crying! Show me to the kitchen!!”

The children stared at Camilla with blank faces.

No, not just the children. Both Alois and Rolf looked at Camilla as if they couldn't believe what she just said.

“...Camilla, are you...?”

Alois looked at Camilla with disbelieving eyes. A nobleman's daughter like her preparing a meal for a big group of children like this... Can you really do that? He didn't say it, but his expression was clear.

“Did I not tell you before that cooking was my hobby?”

Camilla said that, with a snort of laughter.

“Even for this many people?”

“Whether I am cooking for one or cooking for ten, it doesn't matter.”

As Camilla stuck out her chest, Alois frowned. Then, he sighed as if giving in.

“...Very well. I'll help you out as well. I'd be worried if I left you alone.”

“Lord Alois will?”

This time, it was Camilla's turn to look disbelievingly at Alois. As Alois rolled up his sleeves, she noticed his thick and clumsy looking hands. With those hands of his along with his tongue ruined by years of food violence, how could he possibly cook well?

“I'm also a man of Mohnton. Even I have a little confidence in what I was taught.”

Cooking was a common virtue in the land of Mohnton. It had nothing to do with whether or not one was a commoner or a noble.

“Did I not tell you that before?”

As if issuing her a challenge, Alois spoke Camilla's exact words back at her.

14

Compared to that cramped bedroom, the kitchen was large and well looked after.

There was a big oven to bake bread in, as well as two small furnaces over which a pot could be boiled. There was a large clay urn that stored water, along with a simple scullery area. In the center of the kitchen was a single main bench for preparing food. Along the wall, there was a shelf that held all manner of cooking and dining utensils, as well as a large chest where ingredients were kept.

The lid on top of it was huge yet oddly cold to the touch. As she opened the lid, she saw a handful of tiny glimmering bottles, as well as milk and eggs.

Those small bottles were magical tools that use manastones to maintain a cold temperature. It has become widely available across the kingdom, so much so that even common people can get their hands on them. That said, since manastones are used as fuel, they are limited by money to only using them for daily necessities. For the most part, these bottles are used to keep food cool inside of a chest or a cabinet, where it was difficult for the cold air to escape.

After checking all the ingredients inside the chest, Camilla looked at the shelf.

She saw the black bread placed in the middle of the shelf straight away, it looked firm and dry. Then there was a tied up hemp bag packed haphazardly with flour. There was some salt and a small quantity of unrefined sugar. Just below that, there were some jams made from various fruits. There was a slightly bruised tomato next to a good amount of onions, carrots and garlic. There were spicy mustard seeds packed into a small glass bottle as well.

On the lowest shelf, there was a big sack of potatoes as well as a perfectly round cabbage. On the highest, there was a basketful of fruit, beans and herbs.

It was only when she moved some things aside that Camilla finally found any meat. A dried sausage, that had been left out for the year. Still, it's better than nothing.

It must have been saved over the colder seasons. As Camilla took out the potatoes from the bag, she handed them all off to Alois without asking his opinion.

After receiving them, Alois placed them all on the cooking bench.

"What are you thinking of making?"

"There are onions, potatoes and carrots. If I boil all those together, I can make a soup. The bread is hard, so the only thing to do with it is using it for soaking up soup and eating it that way. I can also fry the beans and cabbage together with a helping of salt, not to mention the eggs."

If she mixes the ingredients that way, she could easily make several meals large enough for adults. After handing Alois the onion, garlic and carrots, Camilla retrieved two knives from the cupboard. She gave Alois one of them.

"You can at least do the peeling, right?"

"Of course."

Alois said that after taking the knife she offered.

“Let’s finish this quickly and go back to the estate. There’s more that I need to talk with you about.”

“Are you planning on lecturing me some more? Or rather, are you going to say something along the lines of ‘let’s not get married’?”

That might be a dream come true.

“Hmph,” Camilla took to the potatoes with her knife.

“No matter how much you told me that you were serious about losing weight, you never had any real interest in doing it. Lord Alois, you never had any intention of marrying me, so that’s why you could lie so easily.”

“...It was you who said that unless I lost weight we couldn’t be married. Of course, I had to say that, otherwise you would be angry.”

Alois began peeling as well. He seemed surprisingly used to it after all, with the first potato he held being peeled without him lifting the blade at all.

After taking the skin off, the peeled potato was placed in a basket. As for the skin, it was put into a separate container. Later on, they would get rid of them by burying them in the ground.

“So, you were just trying to placate me, is that it?”

“I only did it so that you might not hate living here as much. Whenever you don’t get what you want, you throw a tantrum right away after all.”

“What do you mean, tantrum!?”

“Like so.”

As Camilla raised her voice, Alois spoke coldly. Hitting the mark, Camilla fell silent with a groan.

“I thought that, if you were in a foul mood, you might do something reckless like running out into the night like you did today. I am the one who said to Prince Julian that I would look after you. What would I do if the worst came to pass?”

“...Well, thank you for that, my most kind and loving lord.”

Camilla spoke those words in an unnaturally low voice, as calmly as possible. But, her body showed her true feelings. Her potato peeling became faster and faster.

“But in the end, I ran away after all. Because of that insincere personality of yours.”

“I am the one who is insincere?”

Alois stopped peeling, raising his head.

“I gave you shelter, let you live freely, even tried to compromise with you. Until today, I didn’t try to curb your selfishness at all...!”

“Compromised, you say...!?”

After Alois raised his voice, Camilla couldn't stop herself from yelling as well.

"Oh please do tell me when you ever did such a thing? You never even listened to a single word I had to say!"

"The only thing you ever wanted to tell me was 'get thin', so of course I heard it!"

"That is..."

Wasn't that true?

Wasn't that only natural?

Camilla didn't quite understand what he meant by that. But, as she was lost for words, a child's high pitched voice suddenly pierced through the silence.

"I gotta goooooo..."

Alois and Camilla looked to see who had said it.

At the door to the kitchen, there was a young child, close to tears as he clutched his stuffed animal. Camilla recognized the face of that little boy who couldn't be over four years old.

"You still haven't gone yet!?"

Dropping the knife and the potato she was holding straight away, Camilla rushed over to the boy.

Looking at him closely, it was definitely the same boy who had badgered Camilla to go to the bathroom with him before.

"What is your older brother doing, leaving you in a state like this!?"

As Camilla spoke like that, the boy hid his face behind the stuffed toy like he was being scolded.

"I'm sowwy..."

"It is alright. You held on well... Lord Alois."

As Camilla called out his name, Alois looked at her bitterly, but still obediently responded.

"What is it?"

"I need to take care of this child for a moment. Can I leave this to you?"

".....Yes."

After seeing Alois nod, Camilla took the boy's hand and quickly headed towards the toilet.

When she came back to the kitchen, the peeling was already finished.

As Alois was beginning to slice up the vegetables, Camilla lit the furnace. After placing the dried sausage in the pan and moving it slightly, she soon had it cooking in the fat that oozed out of it.

"I..."

As Camilla began to fry the chopped up onions with her back to him, Alois began to murmur.

“I made time to spend with you every single day. Even when things were really busy, I did my best to talk with you.”

That wasn’t wrong. They were always taking those tea parties together. Even during the busiest times, they would have lunch and dinner together, a day didn’t go by where they didn’t meet face to face.

“I really did try to understand and become closer with you. Even if all you did was complain about my weight, I never thought about not talking to you each and every day.”

It seems like the word ‘insincere’ had stung at him severely. Listening to Alois say those words, Camilla laughed when she realized just what was making him so uncomfortable.

“I have come to understand that Lord Alois is kind.”

He is calm and generous, a good lord if there ever was one.

“But, have you truly treated anyone as your equal? You said you protected me? Gave me whatever I needed? Never scolded me for anything I said? That is because you only ever looked down on me!”

“I... I never had any such intenti....!”

“Have you ever taken me seriously even once!? Did you truly intend to ever get to know who I really am!?”

This time, it was Alois who was lost for words as Camilla berated him.

“But... Aren’t you the same!?”

“Lord Alois, weren’t you the one who had actually given up on our conversations first!?”

“I...!”

Before Alois could say anything, Camilla suddenly cried out loudly. She was looking directly at the bench, more specifically the pile of vegetables that Alois had been cutting up.

“Why would you cut them up so large!? They should not even be half this size!”

“That’s not important right now...! ...Half? They won’t even be able to taste them if they’re that small.”

“We’re not trying to feed you, Lord Alois, this is for the children. More importantly, the smaller the portions the quicker they will cook, so the food can be ready faster.”

“...I understand.”

As if cold water had been dumped over his sparks of anger, Alois meekly began to chop up the vegetables again.

Taking the vegetables he chopped, she began to stir fry them in the pan and also filled up the soup pot with water.

Standing next to Camilla and using the other pan, Alois began to mix and fry the remaining ingredients together.

As Camilla watched Alois work beside her from the corner of her eye, she stopped him suddenly when he was about to use seasoning.

“Ah, wait a moment, Lord Alois.”

“What is it?”

“Please do not use the mustard seeds. They are hard for small children to deal with. As for herbs, it would be best not to use the more exotic ones.”

Truth be told, she was watching him anxiously to make sure that he didn’t use an unholy amount of seasoning. But, defying her expectations, Alois was actually only going to use quite a delicate amount. That said, it was still too a mature a taste. Since they’re cooking for children, they should try and keep things simple.

“...You’re right.”

Equally unexpectedly, Alois quietly obeyed Camilla’s suggestion. Alois put the mustard seeds away and instead seasoned with salt and simple herbs instead, before getting the eggs ready.

Frying them in the pan, Alois carefully maintained the shape of the egg as the edges of it began to brown. As he did, he looked at Camilla who began to add the tomato to the pot.

“.....You seem quite used to this.”

“Are you surprised?”

Camilla laughed as she glanced at Alois.

Even if it’s well looked after, it was still quite a poor kitchen. She had perfectly peeled the potatoes with a knife that barely had any keen to it and made a delicious seasoning with barely any ingredients. Even though there was very little meat and she hadn’t used any sugar, Camilla had still managed to skilfully make her dishes.

“You did not think that such an arrogant and bad-tempered girl could cook in a place like this, is that it?”

As Camilla said that, Alois couldn’t meet her eyes. He looked down at the ground, frowning as he did.

It was then that he perhaps realized just why Camilla had run away from the house in the first place.

“Back then... Were you listening?”

As Alois looked down at the pan, the whites of the eggs began to wither.

15

The meal was almost a riot.

In a dining room next to the large kitchen all the children were sat at the same long table.

Before the children, the gently simmering soup and sliced up bread had been placed. In the center of the table, there was a large omelette based dish, garnished with salted cabbage and fried beans.

But, you couldn't see even a trace of that neatly plated food now.

Even after cooking and serving the food, Camilla and Alois were kept busy.

"Geh, carrots hate."

"Don't be so selfish! They're only small portions, so just swallow them without chewing!"

Camilla scolded a child trying to throw away the carrots on their plate But, since they hated carrots so much, they cheekily yelled 'No!' and kept trying to do it anyways.

She was about to keep telling them off, but suddenly voices were raised behind her.

"It spillleeeeeed!"

When she turned around to look at the voice that cried out, she saw Alois racing over as far as his heavy body could take him. Just as she was looking, she suddenly saw a boy reaching onto the plate of the girl sitting next to him.

"Ahhhh! He took my breaaaaaad!"

"It wasn't me!"

"It was you! I saw it clearly!"

Saying that Camilla rushed over to the boy to scold him. But, before Camilla could get there, the boy wolfed down the bread he'd taken and played dumb.

"I don't know what you're talking about? There's no bread."

As the boy mumbled that whilst trying to hide the sound of his chewing, the younger girl burst into tears.

"Why are you making your younger sister cry!?"

Camilla flicked the boy's forehead. But, the boy didn't stand for it.

"Why do I have to be nice just 'cause she's my sister? Because she's younger than me? I want a reason, a reason!"

"A reason, you say?"

Camilla pinched the boy's cheeks hard with each of her hands. Then, as she grinned straight in his face, the boy suddenly felt a little frightened.

“The older brother who bullies his younger sister should have no complaints about being bullied himself, right?”

The boy looked up at Camilla. Even if he spoke rudely, he’s still just a little boy. Camilla is big enough that she looks terrifying as she loomed over him. The boy’s shoulders stiffened and he tried to pull away.

“Now, if you understand, then hurry and apologize properly. I will not bully a child who can say sorry. From now on, do not take food without permission, either. Am I clear?”

“.....I’m sowwy.”

The boy sobbed and turned to apologize to the girl. As he was doing that, a clamour started up again somewhere else.

As Camilla turned to look for the next source of trouble, she caught Alois’ eyes as he was looking her way. But, it was just a fleeting gaze. Alois suddenly had to respond to a child screaming across the table and he rushed over.

○

The sounds of plates and pots being stacked on one another mixed with the sound of running water, filling the silence of the now calm kitchen.

The table had been completely cleared away and the children tucked away in bed. After delivering a meal to the old woman who ran the place, still stuck in bed, Camilla and Alois began to clean up the kitchen together.

Camilla washed the dishes, whilst Alois dried and put them away. They played their assigned parts in silence for a time.

Their job had already taken them past the hours that even the adults should have gone to bed. The chilly breeze stung at their hands already cold from the water.

“.....You’re quite used to handling children, aren’t you?”

Alois suddenly spoke that, barely louder than a murmur. He spoke it so quietly that it took a moment for Camilla to realize he was talking to her.

“It really was surprising. Your cooking, not to mention the way you worked with the kids.”

“I showed you something unsightly, didn’t I?”

Even more than her hobby of cooking, this was the other thing that Camilla never wanted people to know about. But, since everything was exposed now, all she could do was laugh about it.

“I did tell you that I often went to an orphanage in the capital, yes?”

“Mmm.”

Alois nodded as he remembered. It was one of the last conversations that they had together before the problems in Grenze.

"I told you that I was doing it as a charity, but that was a lie. In truth, I merely wanted to borrow the kitchen. Because, if I made them food, the children would be happy to eat it."

".....Isn't that the definition of charity?"

"It is nothing so high minded as that. I was just doing it for myself. Not to mention, the orphanage itself was being run by the mother of my friend."

The orphanage in the capital was in a far better state than this old house, it wasn't even a fair comparison. But, children were the same no matter where you went. They're cheeky, mischievous and full of unrestrained energy. A refined and elegant nobleman's daughter could perhaps coral maybe one or two children, but they would be no match for anything more than that.

So, Camilla had gotten used to running around and shouting herself hoarse, to the point where she had taken on a way of being and a tone of voice completely unsuited for her role as a noblewoman.

"Your friend?"

"Yes. She was my maid. That said, she was quite a bad girl. I have a feeling that her bad habits rubbed off on me."

How to slip out of the mansion unseen, how to disguise yourself as a commoner. Her tongue that has gotten her into so much trouble was mostly her fault as well.

"In the first place, her mother was the one who taught me to cook. Both parent and child were corrupting villains."

When Camilla was sentenced to be exiled from the kingdom, her friend was the only one who truly tried to stand up for her until the very end through all of her tears. She demanded that she be allowed to go with Camilla, but the Prince expressly forbid that the accused take anyone along with her, so they were separated.

It was nostalgic to think back on it now since it already seemed like so long ago. Was everyone doing well for themselves? Did they run into any problems because they were so close to her? As she ruminated about that, Camilla stood in thoughtful silence.

Camilla sighed, shaking her head. Looking down, there were still plenty of dishes in the sink to get through.

"Alright", Camilla muttered to herself and got back to work.

"We ought to finish things quickly, Lord Alois. It is already quite late."

As she turned to look at Alois, her vision was filled with his pudgy face.

Had he been looking at Camilla this whole time? When Camilla had suddenly raised her head to look his way, his eyes widened as if he was flustered.

"Ah, y-yes, let's."

After stammering that out, Alois looked back down at his work, only speaking again sometime later.

“.....I believe I have misunderstood you.”

“Misunderstood?”

“When you first arrived and demanded that I ‘lose weight’, I thought of you as a shallow person who only cared about appearances and didn’t have a shred of gratitude. A self-centered and foolish person who didn’t understand her position at all. Although you were easy to handle, you also had a short and fiery temper, so I couldn’t think of you as anything but a selfish girl.”

“You truly thought that lowly of me!?”

It felt like every insult she had ever heard thrown her way in her life was suddenly piled on top of her, so Camilla couldn’t help but blurt that out. But, Alois continued with a serious face.

“...But, that wasn’t all of it. I should have been able to tell straight away just from talking to you.”

“You still will not take back the words from earlier, though?”

Camilla laughed dryly. His bad first impression of her hadn’t been wiped away, he had simply gained another impression of her on top of it.

– Well, it does not feel too bad.

“Lord Alois, you’re surprisingly honest at times?”

As she poked him with those words, Alois’ eyes narrowed. Then, staring at Camilla for a while like that, he finally let go of the breath he was holding in.

“My face and my body, those are the parts you hate, right?”

“Excuse me?”

As she looked puzzled at his sudden words, Alois turned away. He shifted his gaze away so as not to meet Camilla’s eyes. It was as if he were looking at something in thin air that she couldn’t see.

Alois breathed a sigh as he looked at that void.

“...Camilla, I... I think I am going to lose weight.”

Camilla blinked. She heard some sort of audible hallucination, so she touched her ears to make sure they were still working.

“What caused this change of heart all of a sudden?”

No matter how much Camilla had told him to ‘lose weight’ before, he had never seriously done anything about it. Had the words of intent to lose weight truly been uttered by this big man himself? Actually, the first question to ask was whether or not he was serious? Was he just leading her on again?

As Camilla stared at him suspiciously, Alois still just looked at that empty space. He had been wiping the same plate for about a full minute, which had long since been dry.

“Somehow... Somehow, it happened... In order to lose weight, where do you think I should start?”

“....Umm, well, the first thing to do would be to reduce your amount of meals, even just by one?”

These were the words that Camilla had been so desperately waiting to hear, but her thoughts weren't keeping pace, so all she could do was start reciting the plan she hatched so long ago.

After all, eight meals are far too many.

16

“Oi, evil old lady. Are you going home now?”

It was almost midnight already. It would cause a big ruckus if they stayed out overnight without telling anyone, so they made to leave after saying their goodbyes to the old woman who ran the orphanage. But, that’s when they heard that cheeky sounding voice calling out to Camilla, who was following Alois out the door.

“Who are you calling old!?”

Camilla turned around with a frown, snapping at whoever said that.

At the end of the hallway was Rolf, who seemed to be upset with something as he pouted. That dark blonde hair of his seemed to glow with the light of the candlestick that illuminated the hallway. Even the flame seemed to dance in his eyes as he glared.

“You, you’re that woman from the rumours, right? Is it true that you bullied the girl the Prince loves?”

“Haa?”

“And is it true that you had to marry Lord Alois as punishment?”

“You really believe such rumours? They’re all lies, lies!”

-Rather, they’re mostly lies. But, this will only get more complicated if I mention that ‘this and that are mostly true’.

As Camilla said that, Rolf grinned at her.

“Yeah, you must be right about that? The rumours said you were really clever, that you even deceived the King and the Prince with sweetness. But you’re stupid, dense and you can only say mean things!”

“Are you making fun of me!?”

Camilla bristled at the insults suddenly being thrown at her as she was leaving. Rolf’s words stung at those feelings of hers that were still raw.

“Ahh, the evil old lady got mad! She’ll spread bad rumours about me!”

“I will not do such a thing! Y-You naughty boy!”

Thinking to smack him on the head, Camilla reached out for Rolf. However, Rolf managed to elude her hands as he kept smirking at her like a fool.

“You really are mean aren’t ya? You don’t suit Alois at all, huh?”

As he linked his fingers behind his head, Rolf laughed Camilla tried to reach out and grab the cheeks of that cocky boy.

As she did, though, a cool breeze blew in from the open door, the cold wind sweeping up the hair of that bad kid.

“.....So, y’know, if Alois decides he doesn’t like you anymore, you can just come back here again... Since you’re such an evil old lady, it’s obvious that people will hate you someday, right!?”

After saying that, Rolf flattened down his windswept hair with his hands.

“Later!”, he shouted, then disappeared into the depths of the house.

○

The next morning.

There was a rumour going around amongst the servants that Alois brought Camilla back alone in the middle of the night.

Along with those rumours, there were also the whisperings of the disturbance that caused the whole scene yesterday itself.

That villainess from the newspapers had made a maid cry her eyes out, then after throwing a wild temper tantrum had rushed out blindly into the town, she then got herself into trouble in the midst of the nightlife and had to be brought back by the Master himself... That was the kind of gossip going around.

It was a story that had acquired legs and a new pair of shoes. Somehow, it seemed like a familiar situation.

-Nothing at all has changed since yesterday...!

Alois could hardly shed all those pounds in just one day, whilst the way people view Camilla was hardly going to shift overnight either. Although the servants in the mansion treated Camilla with professional courtesies, their eyes remained cold. Rather, due to everything that had happened the day before, their gazes seemed even more barbed than usual.

Although she had come back to the estate of her own accord, perhaps it would have been better just to simply stay at the orphanage.

As Camilla was sullenly thinking about everything that had happened, there was a sudden knock on the door.

Although she permitted them to enter instinctively, she didn’t know who it was that could be visiting her. Despite returning home so late at night, Alois had left early in the morning to finish his remaining work. Right now, Camilla couldn’t think of anyone who would want to visit her apart from him.

“Please excuse me...”

The person who opened the door had a timid voice.

As she entered, Camilla looked at the short young maid... A petite young girl with familiar eyes, like a baby animal.

“...You.”

“Mistress, um...”

“Are you not the maid from yesterday!? How dare you show your face to me!?”

She was the root cause of all of yesterday’s disturbances. She had deceitfully refused Camilla’s request, skipped work in the break room, spoke ill of Camilla behind her back and when confronted directly burst into tears. Today, it seems that she’s without her two friends. She must have a lot of guts to come alone.

“Why are you even here!? Do you know what I went through because of you!? They made a mess of my cooking, turned the meal into a riot and I even had to deal with them in the restroom...!”

“Um, I... I...”

“Despite that, I’m still your better! Have you been taught properly at all!? Just what kind of lazy work have you been doing here up until now!? How can you be so selfish and shirk work like that, and then cry the moment you’re faced with your irresponsibility!?”

“Ahh... Uuu...”

The maid tried to open her mouth to say something. But, the only thing that came out of her mouth was a quiet moan. As Camilla glared at the maid whose eyes were glued to the floor, that moan turned into a heaving sob. As her shoulders trembled, she grasped the front of her dress with those quivering fists.

“Do not think I will forgive you just because of your tears.”

“I... Uuu... Ah, I...”

Camilla crossed her arms as she glared at the little maid. Yesterday, all sorts of things got in her way, but right now she had appeared in Camilla’s room by herself. There is no one here who can help her.

“If you have something to say, then make it clear. Simply bawling will not tell me anything.”

“I... I... I will...”

The maid put a hand on her chest and took deep breaths. Then, her eyes still glistening with tears, she looked up at Camilla.

“Ah, umm, I came to tell the Mistress that I... Ah...”

The young maid was on the verge of crying as she met Camilla’s cold glare. She could barely breathe, her voice interrupted by hiccupping.

“I..... I am deeply sorry.....! I-I know what I did was wrong. Mistress, you were right about everything. So I... I thought I should apologize to you.”

But, even through the sobbing, she managed to say it. The tears didn’t stop flowing down her face as she talked, mixed with gasps for air.

“W-When things like that happen, my tears don’t stop... B-But, when I keep quiet, s-sometimes I can keep them down.”

That’s why, when Camilla had accused her before, she had stayed quiet as she looked down. Because the moment she started saying anything, the tears would flow.

However, if she keeps silent like that, someone will eventually come to her aid whether she wants them to or not. Even if it went against her feelings. What she truly wanted to say, she can't form into words, and everyone around her will simply defend her as they think something like 'that poor thing'.

"Haaaaaa!?! Just staying silent because you're afraid of crying, I cannot forgive you for that!! I got blamed for everything!!"

"Yes! Y-You're right...!"

"Do not think that I feel sorry for you at all! If you just apologized straight away, I would never have gotten so angry, you know!? Moreover, you did not shed a tear when you were talking behind my back, did you!? Do you have any excuse for that, I wonder!?"

"I have n-n-no excuse! S-So if you wish to have me removed, I'll accept it...!"

"See, you can speak even through your tears!"

Although blubbering and talking slowly, the maid still spoke. If someone walked in on this scene, it would very easily look like she was bullying this young maid for some petty reason, but in reality, it was nothing more than a well-deserved scolding if you overlooked the crying.

"If you cannot keep your composure, then you are not fit to be a maid. Am I wrong?"

Nevertheless, if you cry at the drop of a hat like this, then how could you ever hope to complete stressful work?

The fact is, the estate at Grenze often goes long periods without seeing the Master. The main work for servants when he is absent is to maintain the decorum of the estate, send regular reports to the main household on the rates of import and export as well as the quality of manastone being excavated, as well as compiling information about the comings and goings of merchants over the border. Put simply, it serves a similar function to a government office.

Is it truly work suited to someone so emotional?

"Even if you say that, I do not have the authority to have you replaced. It may be a different story if I ask Lord Alois, but why should I have to go so far for the likes of you?"

Could Camilla truly bring herself to beg Alois' favour for the sake of dismissing some mere maid?

No matter what, she could never go to Alois and say 'Please have that maid gotten rid of.'. To show so clearly that her mind was still fixated on her anger about such a trivial thing, Camilla's pride would not allow it.

"You have been properly scolded and I am sure you are reflecting on it. What's more, your apology was sincere, yes?"

"Y..... Yes.

"So, what comes next?"

The maid blinked her tear stained eyes.

“Was your apology the end of it?”

As Camilla frowned at her, the maid looked confused for a moment. Then, she roughly wiped away her tears with her sleeve and took a deep breath.

“...I won’t do that anymore. I’ll work hard and try to change myself.”

She suppressed the trembling in her voice and spoke clearly, with no stuttering or sobs.

“Well said.”

Fufu, Camilla laughed boldly.

“If you ever do this again, I shall definitely have you out on your ear. Do not think I will forget it, either. Next time I come to Grenze, I will definitely make sure to check up on you to be sure you are not slacking off!”

“Yes!”, as the maid bowed deeply before Camilla, the sunlight gleamed through the window, casting both of them in a long shadow.

That clear blue sky that stretched into the distance was a sign that it was soon time to depart.

17

The daughter of Count Storm, Camilla Storm, is hated.

The villainess who interfered with the destined love between the Second Prince of the Sonnenlicht Kingdom, Julian, and the daughter of a baron called Liselotte, she was an selfish, treasonous and utterly obsessive witch.

Even after she departed from Grenze and returned to the Montchat mansion nearby the duchy's biggest city, things hadn't changed.

The rumours about Camilla continued to swirl, especially amongst the younger servants.

"Hey, did you hear? Apparently, that villainess drove one of the maids in Grenze to tears and even threatened to have her fired!"

"I heard about it. It seemed that the Master managed to stop her being dismissed, but she was still demoted and lost a lot of her pay! I heard that she is assigned to being a scullery maid now."

"Speaking of the Master, it seems that things have been strange with him ever since he came back. It's as if he's eating less food than before... After that woman caused such a scene in Grenze, he must be feeling depressed."

"Ehh, no way... That Master of all people? Ah, I'm worried, it's supposed to be my turn to take care of that woman today..."

"Ah, I feel sorry for you. Although, I actually have a good idea..."

o

-Somehow, things are even worse than before...

A few days after returning from Grenze, in the Montchat manor.

Camilla tapped her foot on the ground as she sat, clutching a letter from Therese in her hand.

The cold and distant attitude of the servants hadn't changed at all. Actually, ever since getting back, no one seemed to want to meet Camilla's eyes at all.

It seemed that gossip about everything that had happened in Grenze had managed to find its way back here already. Alois' number of meals had been reduced from eight to seven, but if anything that seemed to just heighten fears about Camilla's growing influence.

The servants had become even more fearful and skittish around Camilla than they had before. They made their excuses and escaped as soon as their work was done even more eagerly than they had in the past.

And it seems that misfortune always flows in torrents, symbolized by the letter from Therese she held in her hand.

Prince Julian and Liselotte's engagement was completed without a hitch. His Royal Majesty and His Highness Prince Eckhart even proclaimed he was happy how 'After not being misled by a worthless

woman of poor character, the Prince has found happiness with a wonderful new woman' as he blessed them... Isn't that lovely?

“Worthless woman of poor character”, that could only be talking about Camilla.

Back when she was in the capital from what Camilla could gather, the First Prince Eckhart had always been happy about his brother's proposed marriage with the daughter from the family of Count Storm. He was a serious person who was more focused on building the power of the royal family instead of caring about love and romance. He often frowned when he heard the stories about how Prince Julian loved a girl from the relatively low ranked Ende family.

In fact, Prince Eckhart and Prince Julian had been known to clash on this issue. There's no way he really blessed their engagement.

Although she's sure of that, there's no way for Camilla to make sure of it as she is now. There's no way to really tell exactly what's going on in the Royal Court since all the information she had to go on were the letters from Therese and the newspapers full of gossip that cast Camilla as a villainess.

And what's more...

“Father and Mother want to adopt Therese...!?”

Since Camilla was thrown out, Count Storm has no heir.

If Camilla were to marry Prince Julian, his plan had been to adopt a second child. If that engagement didn't come to fruition, he was planning to find a son-in-law from somewhere else.

However, Camilla became the most hated person in the kingdom suddenly, banished to become the wife of the ‘Toad of the Swamp’, hardly a fitting man to be his son-in-law. Her parents were also at an age where it would be difficult for them to have another child.

Naturally, they want to secure the line of succession somehow. That's where Count Storm's younger brother Neumann came in. More specifically, his only daughter, Therese.

She understood the reasoning. It was necessary for her family's social standing to survive.

-But, this still makes no sense!

She crushed the letter in her hand as she chewed her bottom lip.

An image of a haughty Therese laughing in triumph floated through her mind. Her laughter will never stop at this rate. Although Therese had impressive looks, influence and popularity, there was one area where she couldn't match Camilla until now. That was her status as the daughter of a Count.

...I was thrown away...

Her parents abandoned the possibility that she would ever return to the capital. Otherwise, why else would they adopt Therese, whom Viscount Neumann dotes on so much?

Camilla's father Count Storm and her uncle Viscount Neumann were as close as brothers could be.

They had been close as children and even after his brother married into the Neumann family, they always made time for one another. The Count loved his cute little brother and the Viscount always felt he could rely on his older brother.

Camilla remembered that her uncle would always come to visit her father whenever he had a favour to ask or was in some sort of trouble. Camilla, an only child, had been envious of their relationship as siblings.

It wasn't just once or twice that Count Storm reached into his own coffers to bail out the financially struggling Neumann family. The Count even offered marriage counseling to him about the state of his sickly wife.

The Viscountess was always frail and bearing a child had come at great difficulty. It was stunning that she managed to give birth to Therese at all. To the Viscount and his wife, Therese herself was a miracle. Having seen that intense love for their daughter with his own eyes, Count Storm could hardly be unaware of it.

Yet still, the Count decided to take his brother's precious daughter as his own.

There must have been some incredible form of compensation.

-...No.

Camilla sighed as she scrunched up the crushed letter in her hand into a ball.

-I can't just take any letter she writes as truth.

The letter was written by Therese after all, who makes no attempt to hide her hatred of Camilla. Until she heard it directly from her parents themselves, this letter was as worthless as Therese herself, as far as she was concerned.

-Bear with it! Bear with it for now! Don't just believe this nonsense so easily!!

"I am not depressed at all! Can you see this!?"

As she yelled that out to invigorate herself, Camilla threw the scrunched up letter into the fireplace.

"When I make Lord Alois into a handsome man, I shall definitely return to the capital...!!"

Camilla remained determined, repeating that vow she had etched into her heart. Then, just as she did...

There was a knocking on the door as if someone had been waiting for their moment.

"...Mistress!"

The knocking continued, but the girl's voice passed through it very well. Or, rather, it should be said that it overpowered it? It was a shout that came from the depths of her belly, like a soldier's cheer on parade.

"Maid Nicole has been chosen as the replacement to serve you, Mistress!"

-.....She came again.

The moment she heard that voice, Camilla's burning resentment faded away into a sigh.

She had come again today as well. The one who had been taking care of Camilla since she returned from Grenze – That problematic maid.



18

“...That hurts! Do not put so much strength into the comb!”

“My apologies! Your hair was all tangled up, Mistress!”

“I am not the Mistress yet! ...Wait, I mean, do not just tear at any tangles with brute force! Do it gently!”

“Yes! I will comb as gently as I can!”

“OW OW OW OW OW!!”

She once again combed at the hair with force and Camilla yelled in pain.

As Camilla sat in a chair, the maid called Nicole stood behind her, comb in hand. Camilla’s beautiful black hair was wound tightly around that comb, basically on the verge of being yanked out.

“I combed it!”

“Wrong! You are pulling it out!”

As Nicole puffed out her chest in pride, Camilla rebuked her with a shout. Camilla’s pride and joy... Well, it would be dishonest to go that far, but the black hair she diligently cared for in her own way was under serious threat.

“You are far too clumsy!”

“Yes! I may be clumsy, but I shall do my best!”

-So honest!?

As she held her head in her hands, Camilla moaned. As Nicole kept combing away behind Camilla, she worked as hard as she could, true to her word, as her brush caught on another snag in Camilla’s hair.

“Wait, wait just a moment!”

“Yes! I will wait!”

At Camilla’s command, Nicole stopped right where she was with Camilla’s hair caught in the comb again. Camilla, at her wit’s end, turned around to face Nicole.

She looked at the girl who must have been a couple of years younger than her, with her unruly blonde hair tied into a messy ponytail. She seems to have aristocratic blood running through her veins, but her parents probably don’t hold any real land or titles as nobles. Her small nose and round cheeks were smattered with freckles, giving her a simple and folksy charm.

Her stand out feature was those earnest eyes of hers, those eyes with an auburn iris and red pupils.

Red eyes were evidence of innate magical power. The more powerful the magic, the brighter the colour. Only the royal family and their branch members will have their iris turn red, but whilst there were people with red pupils, they were exceptionally rare outside of the royal family.

Nicole's pupils were a vivid shade of red that you could see from a distance. That too would probably end up making her even more of a problematic maid in the future, but right now that was not important.

Camilla glanced at Nicole again.

"There should have been another maid coming today. Why are you here once again?"

The job of being Camilla's maid was taken in turns day by day. Did they all hate the idea of being Camilla's maid so much? Or was there something else going on? In any case, Camilla did not have her own personal handmaid at the Montchat manor. Before she had departed for Grenze, she would be served by a new maid every day, who without fail would attend to Camilla's dressing in the morning and scurry away as quickly as possible.

However, after returning from that town, it was only this useless girl that kept coming day after day. Could this clumsy girl even be called a 'maid', when it seemed like she could barely take care of herself, let alone Camilla?

There was a clear divide between the senior servants and the lower ranked servants at the Montchat manor.

The senior servants were usually the children of lower status aristocracy or wealthy merchants. Or, perhaps, a person who had climbed the ladder on their own accomplishments and merit. The butler, head maid and Alois' personal chamberlain were among them. That head maid, Gerda, was at the head of the female senior servants. As for the senior male servants, their leader was the butler called Vilmer, the oldest servant in the house.

The lower level servants were typically a direct subordinate of a senior. If they were a female, they were usually maids that dealt with cleaning and scullery. If it was a male, then they would be footmen or stable hands. For the ones who wish to one day be senior servants, the high ranking positions such as the butler or chamberlain may take an apprentice from these lower ranking servants.

So long as they have a reference from a reputable person, anyone could be taken on as a lower-level servant, even if their origins were uncertain. Or, there were sometimes cases where Alois would handpick someone personally and invite them to work for him.

It was also easy to differentiate between a high ranking maid and a regular one. A lower ranking maid will often see their clothes dirtied because of the hard work they go through. That's why they always wore an apron over their black clothes. They would also always wear a skirt that was easy to move around in but wouldn't get caught or snagged.

Nicole is dressed like that as well. Although she's from a bloodline of a low ranking aristocratic family and one might expect her to be a senior level maid, it seems that her level of skill wasn't suitable for that at all.

"Why is a low ranking maid like you coming, instead of a high ranking one?"

Despite Camilla's suspicious glare, Nicole straightened out her back and sounded out her loud answer just like usual.

“Yes! Since I wanted to serve the Mistress by any means, it may have been rude, but I asked to take this job!”

“Stop calling me Mistress!”

Alois and Camilla are not married yet. Although, that may change if Alois lost weight.

-Stop treating me like his wife until we really are married!

Camilla’s heart was as stubborn as ever.

“I understand completely, Mistress!”

“Were you sent here to harass me or something!?”

As if ignoring Camilla’s shouting, Nicole raised the comb again. Just from her movement, Camilla felt a deep sense of foreboding.

“Then, please excuse me!”

“Hiii! Carefully! Be careful!!”

Nicole’s comb swung down, shattering Camilla’s earnest wish.

19

When things are this bad, she's left with no choice.

"Lord Alois! We need to talk!"

The doors of that room on the second floor were thrown open. It was the office directly up the stairs from the entrance hall.

And none other than Alois' private study.

His workspace was in the middle of the room, surrounded by high bookshelves. As Alois sat behind his desk, he looked surprised as Camilla came striding in.

– He really is imposing in his own way, isn't he?

Even though documents were piled up all over the desk and floors, it was still easy to spot the huge Alois. He was already quite a tall man, so when you added on all that excess meat he really did cut quite an intimidating figure.

The excavation reports from the mining site in Grenze and elsewhere, along with reports about the density of miasma and the strength of its magical power. Alois still towered over that mountain of reports from all over his territory. Actually, you could see him protruding from the sides of his desk.

"Camilla, is something wrong? If you have something to tell me, can it wait until our usual tea time?"

Alois put his pen down, as he looked confused at why Camilla had stormed into his office looking so incensed.

Just like before they had gone to Grenze, she and Alois still took tea together daily.

Compared to how their talks over tea used to be, things were a little more gentle now. Although it's hard to say that the two of them have much in the way of common interests, Alois can speak about current events and Camilla can tell stories of her days in the capital. And, as far as Camilla is concerned, she doesn't say 'lose weight' quite as much as she used to.

As for their morning or afternoon tea times themselves, there wasn't any change in the heaping of sweets and cakes being served, but Alois didn't eat quite as much of it as he used to. Although to Camilla, it was hard to see much of a change.

But, for now, she's just happy that he's at least showing that he's sincere in wanting to lose weight on his own. He stopped taking a meal between dinner and bedtime, although he still eats those other seven meals and doesn't seem to have lost weight at all, at least there's some progress... She wants to believe.

To be honest, she still has her suspicions.

However, right now there's something else on her mind.

"Lord Alois, do you know about this maid called Nicole!?"

"Nicole?"

“That blonde girl, the one with the freckles! Just who is that girl!? She has been constantly taking over my care on behalf of the senior maids every day since we returned!”

Alois blinked in bewilderment as Camilla raged.

“Ah,” then he nodded. It seems like he knows who this Nicole was after all.

“Nicole is taking care of you personally? Shouldn’t she only be given some simple cleaning tasks?”

That’s right. Nicole’s regular job was cleaning the corridors and tidying up the storerooms.

She couldn’t wash dishes because she would clumsily drop the plates, she couldn’t do the laundry because she would accidentally tear the clothes and gardening was completely out of the question. She was only given tasks that didn’t require much skill. So, because of all that, she was relegated to only the most foolproof of cleaning jobs.

Incidentally, Nicole has only been a maid at this mansion for a few months. But, the number of incidents were already uncountable. She was already well known as a problem maid.

This month had only just begun and it was shaping up to be Nicole’s worst one yet. She had already broken entire trays of plates and an expensive vase. Gerda was trying her best to keep her doing as little work as possible, but because Nicole was so oddly enthusiastic about her job that was proving to be harder than expected.

“When she came to my room this morning, she put me through a real ordeal. I honestly thought that she was sent there to harass me!”

“...Hmm.”

“Why did you hire a girl like that!? No matter how you spin it, she is clearly not suitable at all!?”

Nicole wasn’t cut out to be a maid. She was so clumsy that she couldn’t even use a comb properly. For some reason, though, she had a strange passion for the job.

– She would be much better off if she simply made use of that magic of hers to get a job researching sorcery or magic tools.

With those red eyes of hers, she wouldn’t have any problem getting a job like that.

All human beings have some innate magical power, but the strong powers possessed by those with red eyes are exceptionally rare. Having enough magical power that it can visually manifest in your eyes, it was perhaps as uncommon as one in a thousand.

The amount of magical power that a human can possess is something bestowed by nature. Even if you use magical tools to supplement it, one can never increase their innate levels of magic energy. Magical power also takes time to be restored after being used. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that simply having a lot of magical energy marked you out as a talent.

And when it came to jobs that required strong magical power, ‘Sorcery Research’ and ‘Magical Tool Development’ were the main ones that came to mind.

Although researching sorceries could be seen as a bit old fashioned due to the widespread use of magical tools, it is still a very popular field. True sorcery has been around for countless many years more than magical tools, and the pursuit of arcane power and higher truths continue to puzzle and intrigue inquisitive minds to this day.

Magic tools provide the mundane, sorcery unlocks the mystical... Was that how the quote by that researcher went?

People with high magical power are always in demand. You can use a manastone to increase your magical output temporarily, but in the end, it's only borrowed power. Only with a person's latent magical energies can they explore true magic.

On the other hand, the development of magical tools has become big business.

The selling point of these tools is that anyone can use them.

Using manastones to continuously and effectively power a large number of tools is not something you could replicate using human magic. Take for example the manastone powered lights that illuminate the streets at night. If you were to try and use human magic for that job, you would have a person standing on the street all night radiating like a magic bulb.

Magic tools that emit heat or cool down areas can't perform any complicated tasks, but to an extent that isn't a problem. The main purpose of a magical tool is to create a mechanism that can be turned on and off easily, whilst only consuming a small amount of magical power in its operation.

Of course, the development of magical tools is always haunted by the specter of failure. Rather than wasting manastones hand over fist during the testing phase, it's much cheaper to power tools still in development with magical power directly from a person. Unlike the research into sorcery, which is sometimes pursued for the romance of it all, magical tool development is purely for profit.

For Camilla, she has half a mind to help her find a new job herself.

Getting her as far away as possible? She wouldn't say that. It's not as if she has any particular hard feelings for the girl. She could even write her a recommendation letter. Well, since there isn't anyone who would accept that considering Camilla's current reputation, she may have to rely on Alois for that matter.

"Hmm..." Alois groaned to himself.

Apparently, though, the man himself is unwilling, unfortunately.

"...That girl has some unique circumstances. I have a relationship with her family as well. I will see that she doesn't bother you anymore, so can you forgive her just this once?"

"She hasn't been asking permission to come and see me anyways! She just does it by herself!"

In the first place, Nicole isn't a high-ranking enough maid that she should be entrusted to care for Camilla.

"Anyways, is she the daughter of someone important after all? What exactly is her family's standing?"

Camilla had heard that Nicole was from a low ranking aristocratic bloodline.

Such a low ranking family would usually never be able to preoccupy the mind of a duke for long. Of course, if he completely ignored these small houses there may be some unrest, but their power was minuscule enough by comparison that he could quash them even if they banded together.

“It isn’t the kind of thing that you would be happy to hear about, Camilla.”

“Ha ha...”, Alois breathed a strained laugh, trying not to catch Camilla’s eye. Then, he casually took a document about weather conditions and wind currents from the top of the pile. Oh, it seems that there has been a build-up of miasma in the air in the west causing skin irritations, how interesting?

– He is trying to palm me off.

The fight they had gotten into over who was being ‘insincere’ was still fresh. She got angry just remembering and was about to yell at Alois when...

There was a sound of something big shattering outside.

It sounded like it was nearby as well. Before the echo of that smashing sound disappeared, someone’s piercing yell rang through it.

“Nicole! You... You lost control of your magical powers again!? Just how many times has it been now!?”

“Yes! This is the seventh time in total and the sixth time this month!”

As Camilla turned back to Alois, she saw that he had his head in his hands.

○

Camilla darted through the doors of the office out of sheer curiosity, and from the top of the stairs, she could see the entrance to the mansion.

Beside the entrance, there were two large pots with beautiful symmetrical patterns. Well, now there was only one. The unfortunate pot that became a casualty was smashed into tiny pieces on the ground.

Looking at it, one could see that it hadn’t simply been dropped and broken like that. If you had dropped it on the floor, it would have smashed into all sorts of mismatched jagged debris. Instead, the pieces on the ground were all exactly the same uniform shape.

Besides the scattered fragments, there was a senior maid as well as Nicole, bowing at almost a perfect right angle. Nearby, the servants that had been busy working stopped to stare at the scene.

Following after Camilla dashed out, Alois rushed into the hallway as well, albeit a little slower. He stood next to Camilla as they watched what was going on.

“Why are you working here in the first place!? Weren’t you assigned to sweep leaves in the garden!?”

“Yes! I told the maid assigned here that I wanted to do this job no matter what, so I took her place!”

“And I told you clearly to only do the work you are given! That’s because you can’t handle your magical power at all!”

“Yes! I am deeply sorry!”

As Nicole bellowed out those words, the senior maid sighed as she shook her head. She did her best to not get angry as she lowered her voice.

“....My goodness, you’re from the Ende family, so just why are you like this?”

That quiet voice of hers carried well across the hall. Nicole raised her head as if those words had startled her. She opened her mouth to say something... But, before she could let the words out, the senior maid kept talking.

“That’s enough already. You can finish up for today. I’ll report all of this to Miss Gerda.”

“Yes...!”

Nicole bowed deeply again. Then, she turned quickly around on her heel and left through the entrance. Now that Camilla knew the truth, Alois lay his hand across his forehead as if he had given up.

“Ende... She said...?”

“It’s exactly as you think.”

“The Baronial House of Ende...”

Liselotte Ende.

The family of the woman who had defeated Camilla back in the capital and exiled her to this inhospitable place.

She never thought that she would hear that hateful family name again all the way out here.

20

The House of Ende were once direct vassals to the House of Montchat.

However, their time as direct subjects came to an end long ago. Back during the age where Sonnenlicht was constantly at war with its neighbours, the Montchat family had played a shadowy and enigmatic role in service of the crown, with the Ende family as their aides.

These days, however, the Ende family are functionally independent from the Montchat. Although it was small, the Ende family did hold some territory of its own and used that land to launch their own enterprise, no longer relying on the financial support of the Dukes of Montchat.

Still, the Ende family keeps the old traditions they held with the Montchat family alive. Ende family members are often sent to work for the Montchat lords. But now it was for the sake of a business relationship, not any sort of inter-familial intimacy. It had been a practice for many years of the Ende house to send younger family members to be servants or attendants at the Montchat manor.

“Because the Ende family are such big names when it comes to magical research, they can’t be neglected as business partners.”

After they returned to his office, Alois said that with a sigh of resignation.

As he slumped down in his custom-built desk chair, designed to hold his weight, his clothes were damp with sweat. As Camilla glared daggers at him, the sweating didn’t stop as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

When Camilla sat in the small chair in front of the desk, she simply scowled at him in silence with her arms crossed. She did nothing but breathe deeply, keeping her tongue behind her teeth. Still, even Alois felt a little cowed by that intense aura of intimidation.

The rivalry between Liselotte and Camilla over the Prince’s love had become a full-blown disturbance. Camilla, the daughter of Count Storm, had been defeated, in the process becoming a vilified person throughout the capital. Nevertheless, the exporting business of Count Storm couldn’t be cast aside so easily, especially since his territory’s signature brand of wine was deeply popular.

Business links between families were like that. No matter how hated Camilla herself might become, no one was ever going to go after her family when their own profits would suffer for it. The trust built up over generations of cordial business relationships weren’t bonds that could be shattered so easily. The Storm family’s business still seems to be going strong... She had learned that from the dribs and drabs of news that found their way to this land. This year’s vintage actually enjoyed more success than the previous year’s.

To damage or potentially sever relations with the Ende family, a partnership going back generations, all solely for the sake of Camilla? As a duke, Alois couldn’t take such a rash and self-destructive action like that. To weigh Camilla against an entire house, it was as clear as day which relationship was more important.

Not to mention, until very recently, Alois himself didn't exactly have a good impression of Camilla. He had tried to keep her placated at first, but they had finally come to an understanding, so at the very least that was a step forward?

"In the Ende family, children born with strong magical powers are relatively common. Their magic is also incredibly useful for finding new manastone deposits. In exchange for preferential rates on manastone prices, they exchange with us a member of their family... That's how it has always been between us."

That's how Nicole came to be here. Even if she might not be skilled, she should be useful for her high magical energy alone. A person with large amounts of magical power is much more sensitive to the flow of naturally occurring magic in the miasma.

But, Camilla isn't interested in the practical side of it.

"...Do you know Liselotte?"

Camilla struggled to keep a lid on her passions as she asked that. Since Alois has already given up trying to hide it from her anymore, he didn't make any excuses, nodding obediently.

"She apparently used to come and play here quite a lot in the old days. I've hardly spoken with her since then, though, and I can barely remember her face either."

"In the old days..."

"It has already been over ten years now."

Alois doesn't actually remember exactly when it was that he last saw her.

He barely recalled anything about the girl he hadn't seen in over a decade. Although he met often with members of the Ende family, Liselotte herself had been living in the capital for years now. There were precious few times they could have ever met, considering Alois rarely leaves his own lands.

The way Alois spoke about her now, his voice was as dry and flavourless as if he were talking about some routine business dealing. If it was a person who had left a strong impression in his memory, that would have shown through in his speech. Perhaps it really is true that they haven't met in years and he barely remembers her?

But, for Camilla, that doesn't change the truth that they were once quite familiar.

"Liselotte would have been a cute girl, even back then."

-At least, on face value.

She kept that part to herself.

What's more, Camilla herself was well aware of just how loaded that sentence was.

Liselotte was definitely cute. Her bright blonde hair looked soft to the touch, she had a petite and delicate figure and was a girl who seemed quiet and polite when you first met her. But, she was unexpectedly a person full of cheerful laughter, as well as a slight mischievous streak. She wasn't

naturally a beauty that would turn heads wherever she went, but her underlying cuteness made her seem like an uncut gem, something that could easily be polished until it gleamed.

She wasn't a truly bad person, but she was no saint either. She knew how to curry favour, when to nod along quietly and when to lavish someone in praise... What's more, she was an incredible actor.

She rarely shed tears, but that only made the times that she wept all the more impactful. At other times, she would suddenly show off an expression far beyond her years, as if that gemstone truly had been polished to a dazzling shine.

"Prince Julian fell in love with that Liselotte at first sight. So how can you say that you weren't charmed by her back then, Lord Alois, even if you say you don't remember her?"

Liselotte was cute, gentle and fluffy, a girl that would easily tickle the heart of any man she met. They had the sense that she was something that they had to protect.

She was the exact opposite of Camilla, who was tall with sharp and well-defined features. With her straight black hair and strong, prideful eyes, instead of seeing her as someone they want to protect, men sometimes felt like they needed to be protected from her.

Camilla herself, however, never wanted to be protected by anybody. Instead of relying on others to do things for her, she would rather step up and manage it herself.

Because of that wilful personality of hers, people often said that she 'wasn't cute'. Nevertheless, Camilla never thought that she would lose to someone 'cute'. That was, however, until she was exiled from the capital.

"...She's the kind of girl everyone likes."

".....Hmm?"

As Camilla sighed, Alois looked at her in silence. Then, after blinking once, he tilted his large head to the side in thought.

"I don't really remember Liselotte, so I don't really understand what you mean, but..."

Alois rubbed his chin with his hand as he caught Camilla's eyes. For some reason, his face looked more serious than ever.

"Personally, I think that you're quite beautiful, Camilla."

"Ha...?"

Camilla's mouth hung open as she tried to find the words to respond to that, but nothing came out.

All sorts of reactions to that ran through her mind.

'Beautiful' and 'cute' had very different meanings. If he was just trying to flatter her, would he really have used the word 'beautiful' instead of something a little less grand?

Besides, being called 'beautiful' isn't exactly something that makes her happy.

– Well, I can't say it feels bad, either.

“Please only say something like that after you have lost half your weight.”

Compared to Alois, any random person you could pick off the street could be described as beautiful. It's hard to meekly feel happy about a compliment like that when it's Alois paying it.

“...You really don't hold back at all, don't you?”

At Camilla's blunt and honest reaction, Alois laughed incredulously. He can only laugh now because he has gotten used to it.

“So, half is enough then?”

Just what sort of standard is that? That seems to be what he's asking. With that body of his...

It was hard to really judge exactly what Alois felt though, difficult to read as he was sometimes.

As Camilla glared at that swaying body of meat, she gave him her reply.

“Not feeling like being obstinate today?”

Almost on instinct, Camilla poked him as if she was looking for a fight. That competitive nature of hers was fired up.

– If only losing weight was that easy.

Camilla had always been prepared for a long campaign. Her opponent was someone three times larger than the average man. By her most optimistic estimates, it would take at least a year just to have him eating like a normal human being, much less looking like one.

The most important key to losing weight is strong willpower. Being able to resist the temptations of food. Being able to remain patient. Being able to fully believe in your own ability to lose weight.

For the man who grew up to be such a toad, never showing a shred of that willpower in the past, it was easier said than done. If he had ever truly thought about his weight before, would he have ever ended up looking like this?

This man lacked any willpower at all. With that sort of conviction, she made up her mind about him.

“Fine then, half is good enough for me! Now show me that you can actually do it!”

“I'll do my best.”

As Camilla looked at him with eyes that burned passionately, Alois simply shrugged. Once again, with that simple gesture as a reply, it was hard to understand what he truly meant. Was he being earnest or was he leading her on again? She couldn't tell, and that only made her angry.

– I am definitely going to let you have it later!

If only he could really lose that weight, then everything would be fine. As Camilla glared at Alois with that sort of focus, the issue of the Ende family slipped from her mind for the time being.

I never mentioned this before, but I suppose I should. 'Montchat' is French, so pronounce it with both t's silent.

Also, sorry about if you saw ads breaking up chapters yesterday, I was doing some experimenting and it got out of hand. It won't happen again. This isn't AsianHobbyist.

21

“Ahh, if only that girl was around, I could have her do that work for me as well today.”

“There’s no use, that kid is too much of a handful right now. No matter how awful that person is, there would be a real fuss if she ended up getting hurt, you know.”

“Her magical power is really that unstable? Hmph... Well, there’s no point in letting it get all pent up. She should be able to use it as she likes... So, how about we do this?”

○

About a month had passed.

Just as Alois said, Nicole hadn’t visited Camilla even once since then. Now a different maid would come in to attend to Camilla every day, barely hiding their disgust as they did so.

Meanwhile, the problems Nicole was causing in the mansion were only increasing. Her remarkable magical energy was growing ever more rampant, thus breaking more and more things around the manor, so the maids had their hands full just trying to keep Nicole doing as little work as possible.

Her magic power usually rampaged the worst when she was alone. Usually, it would only be ceramics like vases and plates that would be destroyed, but sometimes it would also shatter wood and glass as well.

-She might end up hurting somebody soon.

Alois had even told Camilla that Gerda and the other senior maids, worried about something like that happening, were deciding on whether or not to have her on a long break.

The reason she was thinking about Nicole now was that she had overheard some young maids gossiping about her. As she was passing by, those whispered words broken up by giggles had reached her ears.

She heard all kinds of things when she listened in on the gossiping of maids. There were the typical nasty words about Camilla herself, but there were also talks about how scary Gerda was, how all the senior maids were useless and whether or not the chef in the kitchen was a handsome guy.

There was also a bit of talk about how Alois had gotten thinner recently, but Camilla herself couldn’t really see any change.

Maybe one of his excess chins had become slightly less meaty?

“Recently, her flow of magical energy has become unstable. I understand what she’s going through, having that kind of magical power myself.”

When Camilla asked about what had been happening with Nicole at the daily morning tea they had together, Alois shook his head sadly. He told her all about Nicole’s current circumstances but also went further.

“Going by the reports I’m getting from the mining sites, it seems like the miasma is getting thicker than ever. You can’t separate that miasma from the magical energy within it. It’s causing a lot of instability with the manastones lately, apparently, a lot of magical tools are breaking because of it.”

Alois leaned back in his chair as he looked lost in thought.

“Even though we aren’t near any mines here, the miasma in the air has been so thick lately. There’s always some of it considering the weather around here, but for there to be this much...”

As if to lend weight to Alois’ words, a strong wind tickled at Camilla’s cheeks.

It was too warm for a brisk autumn wind, the miasma it carried leaving her face feeling numb. Until now, there had always been a slight tingle in the wind, but that was nothing to how it felt now. It almost felt like the air back in Grenze.

The sky is overcast, with grey clouds running between the north and south horizons.

Because of the bad weather outside, they were taking tea in Alois’ private room today, instead of out in the garden. The wind had come through the open window.

“When the miasma is unstable, it can cause magical energies to begin to leak out. It can happen if you feel tense, angered or even depressed. At times like this, it’s important to use up some magical energy periodically, instead of letting it build up too much.”

If you use up all your magical energy, it can hardly run rampant. By using magic more often one can reduce their overall magical levels for a time, reducing the risk.

‘It’s a pain,’ Alois seemed to say with his grimace, as Camilla nodded.

Camilla may not be a user, but she knew just how inconvenient magic could be.

Camilla had very little magical power. The only time she had ever used it was when she was taught at a young age. But, Camilla never had any talent for it.

Still, Camilla did know various things about magic.

Prince Julian had, after all, been known for his strong magic.

-His Highness also struggled with his magical power a lot.

A power that had been strong for one person alone that many feared.

That was the existence of the Second Prince of the Kingdom of Sonnenlicht, Prince Julian. His enormous magical power had stood out from a young age.

As a young boy, he couldn’t contain the power that was manifested in his eyes, so his mother – the second Queen – had kept him away from the world.

His magic had the power to steal people’s hearts. His magical eyes enraptured people, as they were charmed completely against their own will. In fear of just what havoc could create, the Queen had the Prince locked away in a tower on the grounds of the royal palace until her death.

Prince Julian had very little to do with the rest of his family, such as the King and his elder brother. It was even said that he feuded with the First Prince, Eckhart.

Of course, Prince Julian had learned to control his magical powers eventually. His bright red eyes remained, but they never overflowed with out of control magic like they had in the past. It was his beautiful face and elegant demeanour that now stole people's hearts instead. Many people had complained that he was soft and lacked a man's spirit, but Camilla had never been concerned with that.

To her, those gentle movements and intangible charms were lovely simply because they were Prince Julian's own. That's all there was to it.

"...Camilla?"

A very different body from the gentle and charming one in her thoughts swayed in front of her now.

"Is something wrong? You were staring into space."

"N-No."

As he leaned across the table, Alois' big face filled her vision. Perhaps it was because of the miasma, but his skin was even rougher than usual. Similarly, other servants with higher than average levels of magical energy were beginning to show signs of rashes and irritated skin.

In his hands, he held a butter cake that was cut into slices on a big round plate. It was topped with an excessive amount of cream and looked sweet enough that you could feel heartburn just looking at it.

But, that was all. Even though there would usually be plenty more where that came from, that was the only sweet thing served with morning tea today.

No, not just today. This had been going on for a while. His meals had even been reduced again, this time to six. Although that was still double the amount of a normal person, it was a significant change for Alois.

-He really is going to lose weight.

As happy as she should be about that, there was a sense of unease as well.

Is it really going to work out so easily? Considering just who this man was, won't he inevitably relapse?

-If he really loses weight, then won't we really be married as well?

That was another thing.

Camilla truly did want to slim Alois down and turn him into a proper man.

She still held that conviction tightly. She would return to the capital arm in arm with a completely new and handsome Alois to confront Liselotte, as well as Therese and Prince Julian. As for the newspapers that had painted Camilla as a villain, she would show them all as well.

'What do you think of the people you made light of now?' She would say. And so she would laugh heartily at the regret and frustration of everyone who had wronged her.

But, after all that laughter...

She can't imagine what happens next.

If Camilla married Alois... What exactly would her future hold?

22

She knew it all too well.

If she truly married this duke, her revenge wouldn't be the end of it.

She would have to manage his residence as the Mistress of the house, as well as stand by his side at all types of balls and gatherings. In order to create and maintain strong relationships with other houses, they would have to meet a lot of people together.

But, the most important duty she'd have to take on would be to give birth to his heir. At least one. A boy, preferably. She had to bring him into this world, raise him up and make him a worthy heir.

– Giving birth to an heir...

If Prince Julian was out of reach, she at least wanted to have a handsome man if possible.

But, if Alois lost weight and improved his terrible skin, could he also become a good looking man? At that time, could Camilla truly accept him? Could she marry him and vow to raise his child?

– That's still far away.

Camilla murmured that in her heart as if to allay the anxiety crawling into her mind.

At the moment, she couldn't really see any change in Alois. All that flab and meat wasn't going to disappear in just a month. Although if you looked closely, maybe one of his chins really had receded slightly.

– I'll think about it more once he actually loses that weight.

It was still too early to be sure he was actually going to slim down. The higher he climbs, the further he has to fall. Where had it come from in the first place? His sudden desire to actually 'lose weight'? For the time being, Camilla feels she ought to pay strict attention so that he doesn't relapse.

She knew that's what she had to do.

As Camilla was lost in thought, she was roused by the sudden sound of something shattering nearby.

She had gotten used to it recently. Since it kept on happening no matter how many times she was scolded, no one was really startled by the tell-tale sound of Nicole destroying something anymore.

Camilla just shrugged her shoulders as usual. In a way, she was relieved that something had snapped her out of those strange thoughts. She gave a look of feigned shock as she gave Alois a look that said 'there goes that troublesome girl again'.

But, Alois himself had a genuine look of panic on his face. As Alois turned his head towards the sound in a panic, Camilla blinked in confusion.

– Usually he would just grimace at this?

Was it Alois' generosity? Or was he merely indifferent? Either way, he usually tolerated Nicole's blunders without much fuss. She was a family member of an important business relationship, after all.

There must have also been a feeling of not wanting to let such a magical talent go so easily, so he waved aside mistake after mistake when any other maid would have long since lost her job.

– So, what exactly is wrong?

That sound had come from much closer by than usual. – With how close it sounded, perhaps it was the second room over?

Right now, Camilla was in Alois' private room. The next room over was his office. And the one next to that, if she remembered correctly, was some kind of storeroom. Alois had told her that storeroom only contained old books and other assorted junk.

Camilla hadn't ever stepped inside. The main reason was that she wasn't interested at all, but Alois also didn't seem to want Camilla to go inside. 'There's nothing interesting in there,' he had said to Camilla, his tone clearly telling her that she shouldn't enter.

As Camilla looked at him questioningly, Alois stood up with a start, his face looking flustered.

Then, with each thundering footstep quaking the room around him, he hurried out into the hallway. After he did, Camilla stood up and hurried after him as well.

It didn't take her long to catch up with Alois.

In fact, she had caught him before he had actually reached the storeroom, so they stood in front of it together as he opened the door. As soon as they flew open, Alois rushed inside.

The storeroom didn't look like it had seen much use lately. The room smelt faintly of mold and there was a thin layer of dust on everything. The air inside also felt stagnant and dry.

Just as Alois had said, there was nothing in that room that caught Camilla's eye at all. Bookshelves lined all the walls, with old magic tools that she couldn't figure out the purpose of from a glance lying about on tables.

The room itself was also quite small. The bookshelves that also cut off sections from the room from each other only served to add to that cramped impression.

The windows were covered up by those shelves, which explained how poorly lit it was. The only light was a single small lamp powered by manastone that hung on a section of wall. The area next to the lamp was the only spot on the walls not covered by a bookshelf, instead, a large painting was hung there instead.

– This is...

As she approached, that magical light faintly illuminated the painting. It portrayed two adults, a man and a woman, as well as a single child.

The man was tall, with long white hair flowing down his back. The mother was a slender beauty. Then, a serious looking boy dressed head to toe in formal wear, his back as straight as the spine of a book. Although the painting's original colours had faded with age, she could see that the boy's cheeks had been painted a flushed pink and his eyes had a reddish tinge.

– The previous Duke of Montchat?

As she looked again at that towering man, Camilla felt a sudden sense of familiarity. She felt as if she had seen him somewhere before, perhaps the prior Lord Montchat had visited the capital when she was young? Although the stories about the Montchat family rarely leaving their own lands was true, it was a different story when it came to royal occasions.

The Second Queen, the mother of Prince Julian who had locked him away for all those years, died about 10 years ago. At the time, this man would have been the Duke, not Alois. It wouldn't have been strange for Camilla to have seen him at that time.

– Then, this boy must be...

Unlike those parents who were almost unnaturally slender, this quite healthy looking young man gave off a very boyish feeling.

As she looked closer, she saw the words engraved on the naming plate attached to the painting's frame. "Alois, tenth-year commemorations". Then, this really must be Alois and his parents.

– This is the first time I've seen them.

Alois had never talked to her about his family.

She knew that when Alois was fifteen years old, his parents had passed away. Apparently, it had been an accident. But, that was all she knew. Camilla had never pressed him about it and Alois had never brought it up.

There weren't any portraits hung up around the mansion either. She had actually looked for a portrait not long after arriving in an attempt to predict just what Alois could look like after losing weight, but she had never thought to search this room.

– Not a bad face at all.

He was perhaps just a bit too thin for her tastes, but in terms of looks and height, the previous duke passed. It didn't seem that Alois' poor skin condition was something he had inherited either. As she thought about that pockmarked face, she suddenly remembered.

– That's right, Lord Alois!

As she had been gazing at the painting, Camilla had completely forgotten about Alois, who had made straight for the source of the sound in the back of the room and had already disappeared from sight.

Camilla tore her eyes away from the painting and followed after where Alois had gone.

There was a small space in the depths of that storeroom. In a clearing completely hemmed in by shelves and piled up junk, she found Alois sunken to his knees. In front of him was the obvious culprit in Nicole.

Both of them were looking at a large decorative plate that lay shattered on the ground.

"My...Boku Father's plate!"

Alois cried out in sorrow as he held some of the scattered fragments of the plate in his hand. For just a moment, the air around them grew numb. Alois' magical power had almost overflowed in his anguish... But, just as soon as it had begun to seep out, it receded back.

“M-My deepest apologies!”

Standing next to him, Nicole bowed deeply, as if that fleeting burst of energy had terrified her. Is that pale face of hers just because she is now facing Alois himself?

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“...No, it’s fine.”

As Nicole apologized over and over again, Alois said that with a faint voice as he continued to stare at the pieces he held in his palm. Watching from behind, Camilla could only see his huge figure shaking his head sadly.

As she looked at this new side of Alois she had never seen before, Camilla frowned. Just what was that plate to him? This was nothing like the ever calm Alois that she knew.

Although that question did prey on her mind, there was another doubt that wriggled its way to the forefront of her thoughts.

– ...Boku?

TN Note:

Up until this point, Alois has been using ‘watashi’ to refer to himself, which is a more polite personal pronoun for a man to use. Here instead he used ‘boku’, which is more informal and ‘boyish’.

23

In the end, Alois barely scolded Nicole at all, nor did he ask why she was in that room in the first place. Eventually, he just had Nicole leave the room with Camilla.

As they stood outside, Camilla told Nicole, whose face was as pale as a ghost, to go and get some rest. She waited in front of that room for a long while, but Alois never emerged.

From the next day on, Alois' old diet returned.

Rather, it was even worse than before.

He had completely lost himself to comfort eating.

○

“Lord Alois! How can you be eating this much again!?”

It was a few days afterward, during morning tea. Camilla doesn't know just how many times she has said that at this point.

“Have you already given up on losing weight!? Just how much are you planning on eating!?”

As Camilla shouted, Alois' hands stopped shoving food into his face as if he was startled. Then, instead, he reached for the smaller snacks instead.

It was a basketful of baked goods, like small cupcakes and miniature doughnuts powdered in sugar. There were also rounded cuts of buttercake topped with almonds as well as colourful cookies with even more sugar on top.

Was the icing on top of those cookies a mischievous ploy of the cook? Camilla herself couldn't resist those cookies with cute red and blue flowers iced on top of them.

But, she regretted taking one as soon as she took a bite. Instead of being simply sweet, would it be more accurate to say it was like gnawing on pure sugar? She grew even more concerned about Alois' health when she thought about him eating these hand over fist.

As she was thinking about it, Alois began to eat even more of them. There was quite a strange disparity as she sat opposite him, not eating anything at all.

This hadn't just started today, either. Ever since Nicole broke that dish, Alois has been like this.

Not being able to bear watching, Camilla had tried to get him to stop many times, but her words fell on deaf ears, almost like when she had first come to the mansion. Although he might sometimes show signs of returning to normal, he would soon be lost in thought again and then go back to eating even more than before.

“I-I'm sorry, Camilla. It's just lately, I...”

Alois let go of the cookie he had in his hand and sat back in a slump. It was almost as if you could hear the air deflate out of his body as he hunched over.

“I was trying to be careful...”

“You said the same thing yesterday.”

As she glared at Alois, his shoulders just slumped even further. After that, his hand unconsciously began to reach out towards the cookie he had put back in the basket.

“Lord Alois!”

“Yes!?”

At Camilla’s shout, Alois’ hand came to a stop. It’s like she’s trying to keep a child in check.

“Just whatever is the matter with you? Was that thing really so important?”

When it broke, Alois did say something about it being his ‘father’s dish’ as he held some of the scattered fragments of it. Alois’ father had already passed away. So, it made sense that the dish was probably some sort of keepsake.

– Dish. A dish, hmm?

Collecting dishes and pottery was a common hobby. Perhaps Alois’ father had given him a high-quality piece of his collection as a gift? Or was it some kind of heirloom? If it wasn’t important, it would have been in the kitchen with the rest of the kitchenware. Not something that he held so dearly.

“...No.”

As he said that, Alois took the cookie and ate it.

“I didn’t particularly care about it.”

Alois’ eyes looked pained as he averted his gaze. How can he say it wasn’t something important to him if he’s this obviously torn up about it?

“It has been nearly ten years since my father passed away. I was just a little shocked, that’s all...”

Saying that, he took yet another one. As he nibbled on that tiny cookie he held in both his hands, he looked pitiful, like he was some small creature that had been engorged to a tremendous size.

“Lord Alois, please pull yourself together. Now, show me a stout heart!”

“Yes. I’ll be alright, don’t worry.”

“Just make sure to be careful! It wouldn’t do for anyone to see the Duke like this!”

“Yes. I’ll be alright, don’t worry.”

Like talking to a brick wall.

○

As she returned from their tea together, Camilla was full of worry as she walked through the courtyard.

Alois was still sat down at the table back there. Because of how he was feeling lately, it seemed like he was a little behind the ball these days. Even so, apparently he was able to separate his private issues

from his public obligations, so his work wasn't affected. Perhaps it's because Alois has learned to trust Camilla somewhat that he doesn't feel the need to put up a front when having tea with her.

– Then, maybe it would better if he just focused on work for the rest of his life?

His heart would probably break even more if he had to do that, though. Camilla sighed, dismissing the suggestion that had floated through her mind.

Honestly, things really had been going awfully well recently up until now.

She had a feeling that something would happen. In her eighteen years of life so far, whenever things seemed to be going well, there was always some kind of pitfall waiting for her. Camilla, who had been exiled to this strange place out in the sticks after having her engagement to the Prince canceled, knew this all too well.

– I was far too weak.

Her passion hadn't been strong enough and she was struck down.

Alois, despite losing his parents at the age of fifteen, had inherited the title of Duke and had done fairly well in his position. Alois was usually calm and hid his emotions well. Rather than simply being tolerant, he managed to keep certain things at arms length, so that way he rarely got angry. It was rare that he would have to rebuke a servant, but even when he did, he never raised his voice.

But, when Camilla ran from the mansion in Grenze, that was the only time she had ever heard Alois shout. For someone to be so calm around Camilla, a person who never hesitated to argue, it was a rare thing.

He was diligent and dedicated to his work, not to mention always keeping that calm attitude of his. It was a disposition that would make him amiable to others and would keep him away from falling into blunders as well. Other than his appearance, Alois was the archetypal 'good boy'.

So, no matter how important a keepsake of his father that dish might have been, it was still strange to see Alois fall into such a slump about it.

– Was that really all there was to it?

Even if that was the case, the only other person she could ask about it wasn't in this world anymore. She was hesitant to ask Alois considering his present state of mind as well. It was irritating to be left in the dark and she was worried that things were only going to get worse.

There was something like a haze on her thoughts. Try as she might, Camilla couldn't think of something that she could do by herself. With a resigned sigh, Camilla shook her head.

– Fine, then. Putting the past aside, I'll have to do something for Alois as he is now.

Alois' past. For now, she had to push the trepidations she had about it to the future.

The future, meaning marriage. It was still too early to feel so uneasy about something like that. She had to worry about his weight first, not to mention his skin. The first thing on her mind was to make Alois thin.

– Focus on one thing at a time! For now, I need to get Alois his motivation back!

But how would she go about doing that?

As Camilla was deep in thought, something crossed in front of her vision. She had just left the courtyard and entered through the doors of the mansion. As she saw two girls giggle and laugh as they passed by, Camilla recalled.

– Those maids are always spreading gossip.

Those rude young servant girls. One of them had curly blonde hair and looked a little like Liselotte. Because of that, Camilla had remembered her face.

The girls passed her by completely, heading towards the inner part of the mansion. She was a little peeved about not being offered a single word of greeting.

“...Mistress.”

Then, she heard a familiar voice.

Although it was usually bellowed from her stomach like a soldier’s war cry, today it was barely a whisper.

As she turned to look for the source of the voice, the girl stood beside her.

With her mouth closed up tight as if she were biting her lip and her fists tightly balled, it was the maid who was a member of the Ende family. The girl whose magical powers had been running rampant, the problem maid called Nicole.

“Do not call me Mistress.”

As Camilla scolded her, Nicole didn’t reply. Instead, she merely looked at Camilla with her red eyes, trembling on the spot a little bit.

But, that only lasted a moment. Right after, she bent her waist and bowed deeply.

“I...! I have decided to do this on my own! For the Mistress who came to such a foreign place I-I would like to bring you some comfort!”

“Haa? What?”

All that Camilla could see of Nicole was the back of her head.

As Camilla puzzled over her words that she couldn’t understand at all, Nicole raised a finger to the sky. As her finger moved in the air as if to spell out words, Nicole’s began to stand on end. And, for just an instant, there was a vortex of wind around her.

– Magic...?

Camilla’s cheeks numbed as the strong magical energy was unleashed. But, that disappeared in a blink of an eye as well. The wind, the magical power... And even Nicole.

“...I am sorry.”

A faint voice leaked out of the mouth of the figure that stood in front of her.

Camilla's eyes shone. She blinked twice, not being able to comprehend what was in front of her. She opened her mouth... But, no words came out, simply a gasp.

Nicole had disappeared. It had happened in an instant.

Instead, a gentle looking young man with locks of silver hair flowing over his shoulders stood in front of her. A person whose elegance and beauty had always captured Camilla's eye, even though others complained about his lack of manliness.

He smiled kindly as he looked at her softly with those eyes brimming with magical power.

"Prince Julian..."

Camilla could barely breathe out the words.

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It wasn't real. She knew that.

Nicole had just been standing in front of her. As she felt that strong release of magical power, even the ungifted Camilla could understand it. She had used magic. And with that magic, Nicole was showing Camilla an illusion.

Yet, her heart still ached.

Yet, her feet were still frozen in place.

"...Camilla."

It was Prince Julian's voice.

"Camilla, I was wrong. Please forgive me."

With Prince Julian's voice, that figure of his drew ever closer to Camilla.

Camilla unintentionally pulled back. Her shoulders had stiffened up and her breath had become short. She had to calm down. Yet, even as she thought that, her mind began to cloud over.

She had always been watching Prince Julian from a distance. The opportunities she had just to talk to him were her joy. Whenever it seemed like he barely remembered Camilla, it had hurt. Yet despite that, she hadn't given up, using all the power available to her to get near to him and eventually she was happy that he remembered her name.

Then, Liselotte appeared to oppose her and not long after that Prince Julian cast her aside. It had also been Prince Julian who had condemned her to marry Alois, the Lord Montchat.

He and I are the same age. You should have no complaints about his status either. If all you're after is power, then that man should be more than enough for you.

Camilla despaired when he had told her that, his eyes cold as ice. That was the first time she had felt utterly hopeless. Her mind had completely frozen over back then and she couldn't say a word.

Yet, still, Camilla is...

"Camilla, you are the only one that I truly love, not Liselotte."

"...Stop it!"

Camilla shouted, holding her head in her hands. After that deep icy cold that had stunned her, the blood rushing to her head gave her back some warmth.

It was thanks to Camilla's pride that she managed to bring her feet forward and stare directly into his eyes. Even when he had ordered her to marry Alois, she had never turned her gaze away. But, she bit her lip.

"Don't say anything more! Why are you doing this!?"

"Camilla."

Prince Julian stepped forward again. Slowly, yet surely, he came closer, step by step.

As he did, he reached out to Camilla's cheek. That thin, slightly bony hand. The hand that had never once touched Camilla, reached forward to stroke her cheek.

Just before it did, a strong hand pulled Camilla away. That hand was big and forceful looking, completely different to Prince Julian's.

“-What are you doing!?”

The man's voice was cold yet strong. A little while ago, she had heard that same man's voice, but it had been weak and despondent. The man who that voice belonged to stood right behind Camilla. His body was huge. As he took a step forward as if to shield Camilla, the ground shook under his feet.

– Lord Alois.

Had he just come across this situation after waking up from his stupor in the courtyard? Or perhaps, did he sense some sort of magic abnormality and race towards it? She could see the sweat rolling down the nape of his neck into his collar underneath his tied back hair.

After protecting Camilla behind his back, Alois traced a sign in the air with his finger. His fingertip was charged with slight magical energy. In the air, letters appeared where his finger had moved.

Camilla recognized the movement of his fingertip. It was a spell called Dispel – Sorcery that undid all manner of curses and magic.

As soon as his finger stopped moving, that magical wind pressure returned for just an instant.

And, when the wind died away, Prince Julian had disappeared, leaving only Nicole in his wake.

“Why on earth have you done such a thing, Nicole!?”

“I-I'm sorry! I-I just wanted to help the Mistress somehow!”

“That was NOT for you to do!”

Nicole trembled as Alois bellowed. As Alois glared in sheer anger, that depressed appearance from before was blown away. Looking down on Nicole, he was every bit her Lord and a Duke.

“In the first place, this isn't the kind of thing you would come up with! Who told you to do this!? Answer me at once!”

“I... I did-...”

Nicole grasped the front of her skirt with bare white knuckles as she quivered. Her red eyes looked at a loss. She opened her mouth to say something more, but no words came out.

Then, she shook her head timidly.

“I did it, it was all my... idea. Please punish me how you see fit. It was my fault alone.”

It was far from Nicole's usual lively and spirited way of talking. Her voice was almost mechanical, not betraying any emotion.

○

Nicole was told to return to her room for the time being.

Standing back outside in the courtyard where the residue of magical energy could still be felt in the air, Camilla was left alone with Alois.

The sky was a clear blue, but the wind was blustering. The wind numbed Camilla's cheeks, but also managed to cool down the emotions swirling around in her chest.

"I'm sorry."

When Alois looked at Camilla, he said that in a low voice.

"It was my fault that you had to experience something like that. I won't ever let anything like that happen again."

"No."

Camilla answered him bluntly, shaking her head.

"I am alright. I... This is not enough to hurt me."

She won't say that she's distraught, or that her heart felt like it had been broken a second time. She won't say that she's hurt.

– But.

It has been more than a month since Prince Julian exiled her from the capital. She had gone through regret and anger, then as she plotted her revenge, she thought that she had changed.

"I am not hurt... But..."

But, when the figure of the Prince stood in front of her, Camilla could barely say a word. She was shaken to her core as countless memories flooded through her. Her body had turned to ice and blood had rushed to her head.

That's how it was.

"But... I am sorry as well."

Alois didn't seem to understand. Just why was Camilla apologizing to him?

As she looked at Alois' sobering face, Camilla felt slightly awkward.

– Just one dish. How pathetic. You've got no willpower. How can you be a duke like this?

When Alois had fallen into a slump after Nicole's act, Camilla had thought some truly awful things about him. She had even said some of them out loud. The truth was, he really hadn't been acting like a duke.

But, duke aside, he was also a human being. He still had a heart. Camilla was the same. She should have realized that.

“Even if you say that you do not mind, there are things that I should absolutely never do... I was being insensitive.”

“.....Ahh.”

As he looked at Camilla acting unusually modest, Alois nodded. He understood what Camilla meant now. He scratched the back of his head, slightly embarrassed.

“I never expected to hear something like that from you... Ah, no, I’m sorry. It was just a little unexpected...”

He smiled wryly as he stopped himself, realizing he was on the verge of being rude himself. As he stayed silent, Camilla could see her reflection in his red eyes that shone an even more vivid shade of red than the Prince’s.

But, when those eyes narrowed as if to laugh, there was just a hint of bitterness that muddled them.

“You really do still love Prince Julian, don’t you?”

That was probably the bluntest and most honest thing that Alois had said since they met.

25

Cold melancholy melted away to red hot anger.

As that day wore on, the only thing Camilla could feel was the boiling rage rushing through her head. She didn't have time to calm down, as when that anger swept through her it snuffed out all her shock, confusion and despair.

It was obviously done out of malice.

It was an attempt to personally hurt Camilla.

Someone truly wanted to humiliate her. It was different from the gossiping that always happened behind her back, something much more cunning and low.

Who was it that stood above Nicole, controlling her like a puppet?

– Do you really think I am going to just stay depressed like this?

Whoever did this was obviously rejoicing in her suffering. So, the longer she wallowed in misery, the more fun they would have.

Therefore, can she really afford to sit here feeling sorry for herself? Camilla got to her feet, lifting up her face.

She might end up doing something brash and making even more enemies, but so be it.

– I need to hear what Nicole has to say.

Who put her up to it? Why did they want to open up her old wounds with such an imitation? Just who was it that wanted to humiliate her like this?

– I will tear you down.

Alois promised her he would find the culprits, but Camilla wasn't the type of person that could just sit idly by and entrust everything to someone else.

She would find out who was behind this herself.

As she chewed her lip as if to bite back her rage, Camilla strode through the mansion alone.

Her destination was the maids' sleeping area.

There was a large room on the second floor with beds and cots lined up next to one another, it didn't get much sunlight.

This was the room where the low ranking servants and maids were quartered. When they were older, they would climb the ranks and move on to have their own rooms.

She moved to the sectioned off part where the maids slept. As she looked behind the partitioning curtain that separated the sexes, she couldn't see Nicole at all. When she questioned the other young maids, they said that some of the senior maids had called her away.

Then, she had to go to the northern room on the ground floor. That was where the senior maids had their rooms.

Those rooms were the northernmost rooms in the whole mansion. For the younger senior maids, they weren't given individual rooms but would instead bunk with several others. Still, they had more personal space than the junior maids, and they got better food and pay as well.

The first three rooms that she came across were all rooms that were shared by young senior maids. Only one of them had a slightly ajar door. Light leaked out from the open doorway, as the other two doors were shut.

It was still early afternoon. Although it may seem a bit early to be turning on the light, these north facing rooms likewise didn't get much sunlight so they could become dark quite easily.

There are people inside.

She couldn't see anyone else in the hallway either. Should she rush in now or wait and see? As she hesitated, she heard a voice.

"Nicole! Did you really do it the way we told you!?"

Camilla held her breath on instinct.

She really had become an excellent eavesdropper.

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"The Master is searching for a culprit right now! You didn't say anything stupid, did you? You said what we told you to say, right?"

As the girl spoke, Nicole's body became stiff. Even though that girl didn't have any advantage over her in height or weight, over the years she had known her, she had been conditioned to fear her.

"I did it all myself', that's what you were supposed to say, right!? I don't think it's possible, but did you rat us out? You know what will happen to you if that's true, don't you?"

That girl's curly and soft hair was the same colour as Nicole's. Whilst this girl didn't have freckles and seemed to care a bit more for her appearance than Nicole, the two of them looked very similar.

And that's only natural, considering that the same blood flowed in their veins.

"Hurry up and say something, you scum!"

The girl shoved Nicole hard on the shoulder. Nicole staggered backward a step, but she still said nothing. She might get berated if she stayed silent, but things would only get worse if she opened her mouth. So, it would be better to just not say a word.

As she watched Nicole stay taciturn, the other girl scratched at her hair in frustration. Standing next to her, the other maids tried to calm her down with a 'now now'.

"Calm down, Leonora. There's no way that we will get found out."

“That’s right. Just because he’s searching for a culprit won’t help him if he has no idea who the culprit is.”

Those maids trying to calm the other girl down definitely weren’t taking Nicole’s side. If anything, they wanted nothing to do with her.

“Hmph,” the girl called Leonora snorted through her nose. It’s hard to tell if she was convinced by that. But, she seemed to have calmed down a little bit as she scowled at Nicole.

Her eyes were lightly pigmented, the same colour as her hair. That eye colour was another difference between her and Nicole.

“Ahh, if only I had magical power like that as well. I wouldn’t have to wallow in a place like this. If I had inherited magic power instead of scum like you, I’d have been the one going to the capital and having the Prince fall in love with me at first sight... Instead of Liselotte.”

She seemed to hate Liselotte in a completely different way to Nicole, judging by the venom in her voice as she spoke that name.

“That bitch who was always going ‘Lord Alois! Lord Alois!’ back in the old days, she sure did well for herself! Since she’s the Prince’s fiancée, she might even be Queen someday! Even though her looks are nothing special!”

“A Queen when her partner is only the Second Prince?”

At the maid’s words, the other girls giggled and laughed. Leonora scoffed as well.

“She wouldn’t be satisfied with anything less.”

As she spat those words out, she turned again to glare at Nicole.

“I can’t be satisfied with this either. Being a maid in a place like this? It cannot end here for me. Do you understand me, Nicole?”

Nicole’s shoulders slumped as she stayed quiet. The girl didn’t care as she kept on talking.

“Everything that happened, you decided to do it on your own. In a thoughtless attempt to comfort the pitiful evil woman thrown away by the Prince, you acted alone. *Just like always*... Hey, what do you think?”

“.....Yes.”

Just like always. Nicole replied, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her hands were pale as a sheet as they shook. Her senses were fading and she couldn’t keep a hold on her flow of magical power. She was terrified that it could run rampant at any moment.

“It’s possible that neither the Master nor that villainess really heard what you had to say. So, please tell them clearly yourself. Bow in front of the Master and tell him about your crime. Tell him that since you’re the culprit, he shouldn’t be looking for anyone else and should simply punish you alone instead. Did you hear me?”

“....Yes.”

“Without your magical power, the Ende family would want nothing to do with you. Just remember, that’s the only reason a bastard child of a mistress is kept around. Your brothers, and the rest of the family, you do remember who are feeding them, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then, repeat it back to me. You did everything alone. Say it.”

Nicole clutched her palms together. It was on the verge of overflowing. She couldn’t even feel the touch of her magical energy anymore.

“...Yes! I did everything by myself because I wanted to! Everything... Everything!”

The tips of her fingers felt numb like she had received a static shock.

Then, someone grabbed her hand firmly.

Nicole didn’t realize that someone had thrown open the door.

She didn’t realize that someone had strode into the room and grasped her hand.

Whilst the maids in the room widened their eyes in shock, Nicole looked at the person who now held her hand as well.

“Come with me.”

Her voice sounded calm and measured, but there was a wave of very obvious anger boiling beneath her words. She pulled on her arm strongly as she said it and Nicole didn’t have the strength nor the gumption to resist her.

“.....Mistress.”

The person that Nicole had deeply hurt with her magic. The person who had been banished from the capital to this remote place. The person who would one day become the mistress of this mansion... Camilla.

Nicole lifted her head to look at Camilla, who stood much taller than her. As she towered above the young maid, the stark image she cut was a blur of barely restrained emotion.

– Did she hear it?

She did. She must have heard what Nicole had said.

“I... I am furious.”

Camilla glared at Nicole as she said that.

Behind her, the girls breathed a sigh of relief. They were relieved that the hammer blow of fury didn’t seem like it was going to fall on them.

Camilla only took Nicole with her as she left the room.

Yet, although Nicole didn't notice it as she feared just what was to come, the maids in the room had their words of relief clog in their throats as that always emotional Camilla flashed them a final look, a chilling glare colder than ice.

26

After bringing Nicole back to her room, Camilla pressed a brush into her hands.

“Comb my hair.”

Once she said that, Camilla undid her braids by herself and sat in the chair with her back to Nicole. Behind her, Nicole simply stood there, looking confused as she held the comb.

“Um...”

“Comb my hair.”

Camilla repeated her own words back ad verbatim. She looked straight ahead, exhaling a deep breath as she tried to keep a lid on her feelings. The anger swirling in her chest had far from settled. Although her true intention had been to strike at those maids, she ended up taking Nicole’s hand by some strange instinct.

It was probably not the right move, in hindsight. But, even if Camilla had the chance to do it all over again, she knew that she would take Nicole’s hand that time as well. And as much as she would like to vent her rage at someone, what point is there in getting angry at that girl who trembled silently behind her?

Nicole hesitated for some time as she stood behind Camilla. But, she couldn’t simply leave Camilla alone without being dismissed and she was hardly about to be disobedient now.

“.....Please excuse me.”

With a quiet voice, she took Camilla’s hair in her hand.

Nicole’s hands were as clumsy as usual.

She didn’t know how to control the force in her hands. She didn’t know how to let hair flow through the comb. The only way she knew how to brush Camilla’s hair was to simply sweep through it with power.

“Ow!”

When her hair got tangled up in the comb, Camilla yelped out in pain and Nicole brought her hand to a stop. Fear ran up her spine. There was no boundless enthusiasm anymore. None of the regular Nicole.

“I-I’m sorry. Really, after all, I’m...”

“Even if you cannot comb properly, I did not tell you to stop. This time try to be gentle with my hair.”

“.....Yes.”

It was as if her body was conditioned to obedience. Nicole simply nodded without any sort of defiance. With trembling fingers, she took Camilla’s hair in her palm once more.

There were few words spoken between the two of them as she brushed. Every so often, Camilla would admonish Nicole's combing. She felt herself getting angrier as she had to repeat the same thing over and over. Yet, even though her anger was rising, Camilla didn't yell or shout at Nicole.

"Um..."

Nicole finally spoke out of turn, as if she couldn't bear this strange atmosphere anymore. As she stopped coming Camilla's hair for a moment, her words were coated in anxiety.

"...You're... Really angry, right...? About what I did..."

"Of course I am."

"Right... Any punishment you have for me, I'll take it. Anything."

"Start moving your hands again. They've stopped."

Nicole started combing again straight away, as if she were startled by Camilla's words. And naturally, she hardly put any thought into controlling her strength as she panicked, yanking at Camilla's hair with the comb.

"That hurts!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

"Stop using so much force, and stop making me repeat myself time and time again. You will never be able to take care of anyone at this rate."

"Yes."

Nicole nodded obediently, taking greater care to be gentle with Camilla's hair this time and ending up actually combing slightly better than before.

"If you cannot do something this simple, I will be in trouble once you become my personal maid."

"Yes."

Camilla's pure black hair wasn't soft and fluffy, but well preened and alluring. Combing it gave Nicole the same dread as handling a precious vase, as she inserted one hairpin. Then a second. Then, after inserting the third, she finally realized.

".....Yes?"

"Oww! How many times do I have to say it!?"

"Mistress? You want me... To be your personal maid, Mistress?"

"Stop calling me Mistress!"

Camilla has no idea how many times she's had to say that. She's not yet the Mistress here. Such a thing has yet to be decided either. Camilla still needs more time.

"Why..."

But, Nicole couldn't understand Camilla at all. She blinked in confusion, completely disbelieving the words that she had heard. Her hand had come to a complete stop again.

"What do you mean why? I will have those other girls dismissed. I was utterly furious when I heard them trying to blame you for all that!"

Camilla's position right now was Alois' guest. And, a potential future wife. She knows she's not liked by any of the servants, but they can't act against her out in the open.

The same would go for her maid. They wouldn't be able to simply force all their work onto her like before. She wouldn't have any time to neglect her duties. Not whilst she remained at Camilla's side.

"If you wish to quit, you can do whatever you like. Since you have such great magical power, you should be able to quite easily find work anywhere? If you are worried about your family, then don't be. The House of Ende can hardly measure up to the Storm family... Rather, they cannot measure up to Lord Alois."

She felt pathetic saying that. But, it's true that Camilla held virtually no power of her own anymore. It's inevitable that she would have to rely on Alois for help. He probably wouldn't take in Nicole unless she did.

"Why..." Nicole murmured to herself again, as she looked down at Camilla who had a slightly frustrated look on her face.

"Why are you going so far for me? I was only ever was a nuisance to you..."

"I am not doing this for you."

Hmph, Camilla sniffed hard as she struck out her chest. She frowned as she looked forward, not turning back to see Nicole.

"They just made me *really* angry."

People who humiliated and tormented others whilst using someone else as a patsy, they were the type she detested the most.

She had been fuming with anger as she saw Nicole simply stand there and take all their abuse silently. That was all.

"If you understand me, then move your hands! If you cannot even comb hair properly, I have no idea how you plan on being my attendant, even if it is only temporary!"

"Y-Yes!"

In a fluster, Nicole began combing again.

After repeating the same motion over and over, Nicole's hands grew more and more steady.

Camilla also didn't have to snap at her as many times. To try and lift Camilla's foul mood, Nicole simply kept combing.

"You have gotten much better."

Nicole didn't say anything in response to Camilla. She just kept silent as she brushed.

The sun that had shone through the windows began to pass below the horizon. Just how much time had she spent combing since that afternoon? She had expected to give up long beforehand, but no matter how many mistakes Nicole made, she kept on going.

In silence, she combed once. Twice.

"Mistress."

Thrice. Nicole spoke softly as the comb passed through Camilla's hair.

"I... I am an illegitimate daughter of the Ende family. I'm not a proper member of the house."

"I heard it before."

"My mother was a maid who slept with her master. Mother also had her husband, and my brothers. If that was it, then it would have been the end of it."

Her family, her brothers. She heard about that before as well.

"But, because of my magical power... My... My family were used as hostages. To make sure I don't try to escape, all of my family work for the Ende."

In Nicole's hometown, the Ende family were the main employers. They had close ties to the Montchat family who ruled the Duchy as well. There was no way for them to refuse. If they did, losing their jobs wouldn't be the end of it. They wouldn't even be able to stay in the town itself anymore.

Nicole kept talking as she combed. The words were pouring forth as if a dam had broken.

"The young lady from the Ende family pushed all her work onto me. I couldn't refuse her either. But eventually, something changed, and they began to accuse me of being clumsy on purpose."

Nicole's hands didn't stop moving. She exhaled softly as she gently combed.

"At the same time, I started to lose control of my magical power. Because of the strong miasma, I couldn't suppress it by myself anymore. But, I did my best not to hurt anyone."

With a shuddered breath, lukewarm drops of water began to fall. They fell onto Camilla's hair and the floor below.

"There were so many people around, people all over the mansion, so I... I had to hold it back."

Feelings of tension, anger or depression. She remembered Alois talking about how magic was influenced by emotions just like that.

– Nicole's magic power going out of control mostly happened when she was alone.

A place with no one nearby. When Nicole was all by herself. Camilla finally understood as she listened to the sound of the tears hitting the floor.

"You have been crying all alone this whole time, haven't you?"

She heard a deep sobbing behind her.

Even though Nicole stopped brushing again, Camilla wasn't angry about it anymore.



27

The next day, Alois paid a rare visit to Camilla's room.

His face looked utterly miserable.

"I heard about everything from Nicole."

As soon as Camilla offered him a seat, Alois gingerly sat on it. The reason he didn't sit down properly is that it would probably break under his weight if he did.

What a shame.

Just as Camilla thought that Alois himself said it.

"I'm utterly ashamed of myself."

".....What happened?"

When Camilla asked him that, Alois raised his face to look at her. He looked even more defeated than when Nicole had broken the dish the other day.

"You're planning on making Nicole your personal maid, right? You would do that, even though Nicole is still related to the Ende family?"

The House of Ende was the family of Camilla's archrival, Liselotte. What's more, Nicole's imitation had broken Camilla's heart, even if she hadn't really meant to. Yet, despite all that, Camilla still decided to have that girl by her side. Alois himself had trouble understanding it.

"Nicole told me about everything else as well. Her past and her current circumstances. Meanwhile, I've just been pigheaded and obstinate."

"What do you mean?"

This time, it was Camilla's turn to be confused. She had been planning on telling Alois about everything, but it seemed like Nicole beat her to it. Her hair was so badly braided this morning that Nicole must have told him whilst she was busy fixing it herself.

"You ended up getting hurt as well. For doing that, I'll kick them all out. But, even whilst all this was going on, I was feeling so sorry for myself over a dish... I'm so ashamed of myself."

Alois couldn't match Camilla's gaze as he said that. It seems that he's ashamed just talking about how ashamed he is.

"But, that dish was important to you wasn't it, Lord Alois?"

Camilla hadn't truly lost anything. Of course, she had been upset when she saw the illusion of the Prince, but that was it. That dish of Alois' would never return. Even if it wasn't quite the same as her situation, she could still understand his feelings.

"It's not important at all."

Camilla raised her eyebrows in surprise at Alois' blunt reply. Although the expression on his face was still miserable when he looked up at Camilla, he didn't look away.

"It's not an important thing to me at all... Rather, I don't really know if it's important. I don't remember."

"Excuse me?"

She couldn't fathom what Alois was trying to say. After hesitating for a moment as he continued to look at Camilla, Alois continued.

"My parents, you know that they died in an accident, don't you?"

She had heard it before. Alois had only been fifteen at the time. Ever since then, for these past eight years, he has held the reins to power over the vast Duchy of Mohnton.

"When it happened, I was there too. Apparently, it was caused by the magic in the overtaxed manastones running rampant. My mother and father both died there, and although I survived, I lost all my memories from before then."

In a single instant, all the memories he had held before that point in time were wiped away.

– He has no memories?

Everything before he was fifteen... Indeed, Alois had only ever spoken ambiguously about his past before.

Even when she had directly asked him about his past, he had tried to avoid the question through ambiguity, saying that 'I probably used to do that' in regards to exercise and saying that he could 'barely remember' Liselotte. Apparently, they hadn't met for ten years, and Alois is now twenty-three. He would have been thirteen at the time. It suddenly made perfect sense why he didn't remember her.

"Well, it's not like I have no recollections at all. Sometimes, I remember certain things. I have faint memories of times that I spent with my parents, but none of them are really warm. Back then, I desperately wanted to remember as much as I could, but nowadays it doesn't bother me as much, so..."

He was going to let himself forget. His words petered out into a sigh, as Alois laughed glumly.

"I was thinking about just letting it go, but there was still a part of me that felt regretful."

The specter of his parents would always loom over Alois, whether or not he truly remembered them. His father was strict, his mother stern. They had done everything in their power to shape Alois as a proper future lord. When it came to his life; be it his speech, his meals, his hobbies and his company, there was nothing his parents did not have their hands in.

However, despite all that, he had a vague recollection that there had been some moments of affection as well. For example, when that family portrait was painted. To commemorate his tenth birthday, his parents had commissioned the painting as a present for him. Those feelings were what had prompted Alois to keep that portrait safely in that storage room, where he didn't want anyone else to enter.

Yet even as time had wound on, and he thought that he had long gotten over the grief of losing both his parents and his memories of them, Alois had still been shattered by the breaking of a single dish. In the end, it was only Alois' fantasy that he had ever truly left it all behind.

"I'm sorry, making you listen to all that."

As his story came to a close, Alois seemed to have brightened up slightly. Then, he looked at Camilla with somewhat anxious eyes.

"It must have been uncomfortable, right?"

"No," Camilla answered without a pause. It wasn't uncomfortable, but it had given her a lot to chew on.

And Camilla was simply the one hearing the story. What must it have been like to be in Alois' position, with vast swathes of your life simply missing from your memories?

"Although it is a lot to take in, I realize you have been through a lot."

Camilla gave up trying to put herself in Alois' shoes as she sighed.

She sifted through her mind for some words of comfort she could offer him, but none found their way to her lips. In the first place, it wasn't in Camilla's nature to console people with kindness.

So, she just says what she feels.

"If you really want to leave the past behind, then you have no choice but to change yourself. What do you want to do from now on? That is up to you now, Lord Alois."

"You're right."

Alois nodded then, after taking a deep breath, laughed softly.

"I do love the way you cut straight to the heart of things like no one else I've ever met."

Alois said it so casually, with so little fanfare, that she almost missed it.

– Did he actually just praise me?

But, before Camilla could really go over what she just heard, Alois continued.

"Nicole changed because of you. I truly think that's a sort of power you have. It's as if you can change people's hearts."

Alois looked into Camilla's eyes as he spoke.

He looked at her in a different way than he had when she first came to the mansion, it was a look that was filled with unmistakable honesty and sincerity.

"Iboku want to change as well, side by side with you."

Confronted by such direct words, Camilla was thrown off balance. The words stuck in her throat as she looked away from Alois, but instead of completely losing her cool, Camilla gained a newfound seriousness.

After clutching her hands together, she turned back around and met Alois' eyes as she spoke.

"...A-As I said before, when it comes to losing weight, I will not be satisfied until you lose at least half!"

"Just half is enough?"

It felt like they'd had this conversation before. Alois' reply was exactly the same as well. 'Is half enough?' and so on and so coming forth from the mouth of the man three times larger than the average person.

She was ready to come down hard on Alois again, but something was strange. Although he had just said that comeback of his, the expression on his face looking anxious... Even fearful.

"Is half truly enough?"

Alois asked again, as if to check.

"...Since Prince Julian is so slender, after all."

Ah, Camilla finally realized it.

– That's what he meant by 'Is half enough?'.

He wasn't questioning her standards to poke fun at her, nor was it a challenge to Camilla's determination to make him lose weight.

Alois had been completely serious when he said that.

For some reason, she had never considered that.

Alois couldn't keep looking at Camilla anymore as his face turned red.

Instead of the obstinate attitude she had expected, instead, he was utterly bashful. Now she was finally becoming uncomfortable. Even though she was in her own room, she suddenly felt even more restless than Alois.

But, it didn't feel bad.

For some reason, she felt a strange sense of happiness, much more than when Alois had called her 'beautiful' before.

She wasn't satisfied with this mystifying turn of events.

Because she wasn't satisfied, she decided to needle him.

"Lord Alois, you do not usually use 'boku', do you?"

“.....Please don't make fun of me.”

Alois kept looking away as if he were sulking. His cheeks turned so red it somehow only amplified the puffy, toad-like features of his face. Seeing that, Camilla smirked.

This was a good thing to hold over him. Until now, she had been rolled around in the palm of his hand constantly. It would be nice to be the one doling out the teasing instead for a change.

Camilla was the type to never forget a grudge she held, after all.



28

Camilla decided to make Nicole her personal maid for the time being.

Meanwhile, all the maids that had instructed Nicole to hurt Camilla in such a way had been fired by Alois.

One of those maids was a legitimate daughter of the Ende family, so complications with the House of Ende might arise in the future. Due to this possibility, the mansion was shrouded with a somewhat tense atmosphere.

Up until now, no girl from a noble house had ever been dismissed from their position. Since Alois was usually quite lenient, he wouldn't dismiss a servant even if they made several mistakes. Furthermore, it didn't seem like those maids had been fired for not performing up to his standards.

So, just why were they dismissed from the mansion?

Of course, the servants all had their own ideas. 'Camilla is the one pulling the strings behind this', 'Alois has been caught in Camilla's snare' and 'She really is just as evil as the rumours say', those kinds of rumours were beginning to catch fire.

Otherwise, the days passed relatively quietly.

Regarding the problem with the Ende family, Camilla wasn't really in a position to be able to do anything. Of course she wasn't comfortable with the false rumours about her, but that was nothing new.

For Camilla, there was only one true worry on her mind.

○

Alois' diet had been reduced to six meals a day: breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. And of course, his midnight snack.

Finally, she had brought it down to only double the normal amount of meals.

Although she was satisfied with the progress, she still couldn't see any real changes in his physical appearance.

It had already been close to three months since Camilla had arrived in Mohnton (is this supposed to be Montchat?).

Two months ago, Alois had earnestly told her that he would lose weight. Cutting two meals out of his diet in two months felt like a good start. Although there had been a short relapse to his regular diet because of an incident, she had managed to get him back on track. In fact, she was already considering reducing his meals by one once again.

If she managed to achieve that, Alois would only be eating five meals. The month after that, four meals. Then, finally, she could bring him down to the standard number.

That being said, he still eats far too much for one meal as it is. The food is piled high and covered in exorbitant amounts of grease, sugar, and seasoning. He didn't seem to care for exercise at all, spending his time either working or reading in his study.

To put it bluntly, the toad was as huge as ever. The servants whispered amongst themselves that Alois had lost weight, but Camilla couldn't see the difference.

– I should move on to the next phase soon.

Judging by how little his body seemed to have changed to her, he would definitely melt into a puddle of sweat and fat if he started exercising now.

Thus, her next aim was to change the contents of his meals.

“Hmm,” as Camilla stood crossed armed in her room, a smile came to her face.

A nefariously evil smile.

○

The Montchat mansion's kitchen was located in the basement.

The stairs leading down to it are directly accessed from a catering area where the food is set on trays with napkins, condiments and utensils. After passing through a set of double doors from there was the dining room where residents and guests alike would have their meals.

The room where the servants had their meals was also in the basement, adjacent to the kitchen. They would only eat after the Master had finished his own meal. It was customary for the junior servants to eat after the senior servants as well.

That being said, it wasn't a rule that was strictly abided to. Because of differing work schedules, it was impossible for everyone to eat all at once. Alois was also not that strict as a Master when it came to things like that. The senior servants would try to keep the old tradition, but the junior servants were often late to this customary meal time.

The kitchen lay beyond that room. Some of the servants were still finishing breakfast while the scullery maids had just finished their work. The cooks were also free until the next mealtime, so the place looked deserted.

In that empty room, the sound of a boiling pot being stirred could be heard.

Over a big furnace that took up an entire corner of the room, a pot full of leftover bones was being broiled. It still simmered and bubbled even though the heat had been turned down. In the centre of the room, there were two long benches. There was a single man in the room, standing on the bench close to the pot. He folded his arms whilst staring at the pot as if he was transfixed, seemingly not noticing that there was an intruder in the kitchen.

He seemed to be all alone and that lonely man frowned as if he was perturbed by something.

His face looked stern as he quietly said, “The Young Master is eating less.”

He looked to be in his mid-forties. His straight chef uniform didn't match well with his hard appearance. Strong muscles sinewed his forearms, uncovered by his rolled-up sleeves. He struck an image more like some kind of miner or woodworker, rather than a chef.

"No, no, he has just been eating too much up until now. So, this is actually a good thing, right?"

The man restlessly fidgeted with the chef's knife in his hand as he paced in front of the oven, not paying much attention to anything else.

"But, I wonder why he decided to do this so suddenly? Did he really come to hate my food?"

He scratched at his head anxiously. As he mussed up his hair in his absentminded worry, the person looking on couldn't help but cringe seeing him barely notice how the knife he held was swinging close to his face.

"No, it may be a little salty, but that doesn't make it bad, right?"

He murmured bitterly as he shook his head. It looked like he was having a confidence crisis.

"But even if it was a bit oversalted, the Young Master always understood the delicacy of its taste. But what if he doesn't want to eat my food anymore...?"

"Hey."

"UWAA!?"

Surprised by the sudden appearance of that voice, the man yelped. The voice sounded like it was right next to him, as if they said it right in his ear.

He raised the knife in self-defense reflexively, but after seeing just who he was pointing it at, he brought it back down.

"Are you the chef here?"

Before he could question her, the girl had asked him a question. That proud looking young woman who was many years younger than him didn't flinch at the sight of the knife, as if she hadn't been there at all.

She was taller than other girls her age, but still stood shorter than the man. She looked quite slender in her simple yet clean dress, with her black hair pulled back into a ponytail. With that dress and haughty attitude, it was clear that she was some kind of nobleman's daughter.

"...Hey you, are you some kind of maid? Don't surprise me like that."



Nobleman's daughters often served as senior maids for the Montchat family. If they only had distant relations or there were some sort of circumstances, they would serve as lower ranking maids. Simply put, the Montchat family always aimed to maintain good relationships with their vassal houses. It was customary that any daughters from these houses would be given good positions in the manor.

As the man called her a 'senior maid', the young lady in front of her widened her eyes in surprise.

But, after a moment of hesitation, she nodded.

"Yes, I am a senior maid. I have a few things that I would like to ask you."

"Fu fu," that's what the woman, Camilla, said with a smile.

○

The food served in the Montchat manor was delicious.

So long as you put the food served to Alois aside, Camilla's personal meals were always delectable and she never had any complaints.

Therefore, it didn't seem like there was an issue with the chef's skills.

In that case, just why had Alois' meals turned into those violent monstrosities?

It was Gerda who seemed to hold great influence on Alois' life. But, if she ever asked that woman to change, she would only be met by the cold shoulder. Things would likely end up even worse between her and the house's servants as a result.

Then, all she could do was go directly to the chef in charge of the meals. What exactly had gone wrong? Why was it that only Alois' meals were awful? Just what was the reason behind it all?

– I will find out, even if I have to threaten him!

Simply put, that was the only way.

29

“My goodness! This is actually delicious!?”

“You really are a rude girl.”

The chef grumbled as Camilla let out a surprised shout the moment she tasted the soup that he had made.

“Suddenly deciding you want to eat Alois’ food out of the blue like that, if I told anyone, you’d be out on your rear.”

Naturally.

Camilla is still someone that the majority of servants either don’t see or purposefully avoid seeing. Even when she tried to talk with them, they’d make excuses and escape. In order to talk with one of the servants just for a bit, she didn’t correct his misunderstanding and pretended to be a maid. Actually acting like one was something else entirely though.

In fact, the chef was actually being unusually tolerant to Camilla who, in the guise of a maid, suddenly told him that she would like to try some of the food he was making for Alois.

But, right now, Camilla didn’t care about something like that.

Inside the pot in front of her was a clear soup. There was only a slight film of fat that covered its surface. Judging by the taste, only salt and pepper had been used for seasoning.

Yet, somehow, it had a delicate sweetness to it. Not to mention a peculiar fragrance. Even though it wasn’t a complicated taste, there was a deepness to it that couldn’t possibly be the result of salt alone.

“...This has been left to stew for some time. You used chicken stock, yes? But just what is this taste? Even though there’s this strange smell, I cannot identify it at all... Ahh, jeez, just what is this!?”

“Of course you won’t get it.”

“Hmph,” the man snorted derisively, but he couldn’t hide the smile on his face. Apparently, he was satisfied with Camilla’s response.

“How could a young lady like you possibly hope to understand my dish? If you could, I would be out of a job.”

“Gugugugu...”

Camilla sounded frustrated. She was doubly annoyed at just how insolent the man in front of her was being. It’s true that she couldn’t understand what she didn’t know, but the one thing she could say for sure was that this dish was delicious.

She had been prepared for something inedible because the food was something prepared for Alois, but for some reason, she felt a strange sense of defeat when she tasted it.

“Just what happened from this point on to ruin the taste so much...!?”

The soup was still being prepared. The finishing touches hadn't yet been applied. Is that when the overwhelming amount of salt is added? But really, who would have expected such a profound taste from such a rough looking cook? After having made it perfectly up until now, just what did this man do to completely spoil it before serving?

As Camilla groaned while rubbing her temples, the man looked confused.

"You new around here by any chance?"

As the man said that, he gave Camilla another assessment. She frowned as the man once again impudently looked her up and down, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I'm not the one who adds the final seasoning and garnishes. I make the best food I can. I'm indebted to Lord Alois so I could never make him something less than the best."

"...What do you mean?"

When Camilla asked him that, the man's face took on a bitter expression. He grimaced as he tried to hide it, but it was futile.

"The best fats, the best sugar, the best salt. The person who leads the family must use it in abundance in excess of anyone else... Dogmatically keeping up with the tradition of the Montchat family, the server must be very busy."

○

The man's name was Günter Brandt.

He was a chef employed by the Montchat family.

He was a cook that Alois himself took a liking to and hired, but it seems that he had his differences with the rest of the house's servants.

Well, he had a rough appearance and a mouth to match. A man like him would be far better suited to running a restaurant in the town, not preparing dishes for a nobleman day after day.

In fact, he is actually a well known culinary name back in town, though that's mostly his own claim. 'I can make any restaurant next door quake with just my voice', he would brag.

Of course, Camilla didn't believe a word of it.

"Why does a little girl like you care so much about Alois' food that you'd come all the way down to a place like this?"

Deciding Camilla was just a harmless nuisance, Günter went back to his lonesome cooking. According to him, he was working on Alois' meal for morning tea time.

Right now, he was chopping onions finely with his dexterous knife skill. The sound of knife on board echoed through the kitchen that only two people stood in.

"I thought for sure you were one of those maids looking for that guy again. Well, he's a devil for skipping, so you're probably better off searching the gardens than looking around here."

Günter seemed to enjoy talking as his mouth moved just as fast as the knife in his hand. Thanks to his motor mouth, Camilla who was standing behind him was beginning to take stock of the kitchen situation of the manor.

Apparently, all the cooks other than Günter are out around this time of day. There were various reasons for it; some of them were taking their break after cleaning down the kitchen once the breakfast service was over, some were out buying food stock in town, others were around back wringing the necks of chickens for dinner, and the rest were just skipping. Especially this 'Skipping Devil', who apparently had incredible skill but a bad attitude and a penchant for women. Apparently, young women often came to the kitchen looking for this Skipping Devil. In fact, Camilla distinctly remembered hearing the maids gossip now and again about a 'handsome cook'.

"He's the eldest son of some well-to-do family, and I can't fault that face of his. He's pretty bright too. He may be a bit of an asshole sometimes, but he's not really a bad guy. For a girl your age, I guess you can't help but be smitten, huh?"

"I am not interested in the slightest."

Camilla said that from the bottom of her heart. Camilla wasn't interested at all, even if he was the most handsome man alive. All her life, Camilla had never cared for another.

So, she expected the same of any man who claimed to care for her.

"What I am more worried about right now is Lord Alois' meals. I was under the impression that it had been made overly seasoned from beginning to end. So, just why would anyone go out of their way to spoil the meal like that?"

"You're an honest one, ain't ya? People will hate you for it, y'know."

Günter told her that bluntly with a laugh. He really was a rude man. Because he had said it so naturally, Camilla almost forgot to get angry for a moment as she blinked in surprise.

"In particular, people around these parts really hate that. Everyone around here is tied down to their old ways and traditions. Naturally, they get mighty touchy when you question them. This really is a strange place. But, that's just how it is."

He turned his neck to glance at Camilla, who still stood behind him. As he looked at her with a slight sense of sympathy in his eyes, Camilla frowned.

"You weren't born here, am I right? So just what did you do to end up here?"

"I am not guilty of anything at all!"

In her anger, Camilla shouted back. Camilla didn't feel that she ever did anything wrong, so why should she feel remorseful? Her only regret was, perhaps due to her slightly blinding love for Prince Julian, she didn't act just a little bit more wisely.

"In the first place, how do you know that I am not from here?"

As Camilla fired back at him, Günter turned back to his cooking, only jerking his thumb in her direction.

“Your hair. There aren’t any black haired aristocratic families around here. The nobles here are very particular about their breeding. They’re always worrying about a criminal’s blood mixing with theirs.”

“.....Excuse me?”

– Criminal?

Camilla repeated those poignant words over again in her mind. It felt like her anger that had begun to burn had been completely extinguished.

Camilla looked at the man as if to try and figure out what he had meant, but Günter’s back provided no clues until he spoke again.

“This land is originally a dumping ground for criminals... Though, that was already long ago.”

She felt a chill up her spine.

Camilla felt like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. As she struggled to come to terms with it, the sound of the onions being cut up began to reverberate through the kitchen again.

Criminal. A dumping ground. Just how long ago was this?

– Did Prince Julian know?

No, even if he didn’t know, she knew someone who absolutely must have.

Liselotte.

30

Hundreds of years ago, Mohnton was once effectively a penal colony.

Thinking about it rationally, compared to the green rolling hills and pastures of the rest of Sonnenlicht, Mohnton was a very different land.

It was always humid, with miasmic winds constantly on the air. A damp and horrible swamp like this, who would ever willingly move here? Your skin would crack and redden if exposed to the miasma for too long and if you were someone with strong magical energies, just coming into contact with it could make your powers run amok.

Yet it would make sense for exiled criminals to find themselves submerged in such a place, digging manastones out of the swamps as their skin was covered in sores. The well-established mining industry that operates throughout Mohnton had not yet developed back then. Manastone excavation was a difficult and hazardous task, that truly put a miner's body on the line.

There weren't just a few deaths either. But no matter how many people died, the manastone mining had to go on. For the war machine, for the study of sorcery, for royal prestige and to cow the nobility into obedience. Even if there were some sacrifices, they served their purpose.

Therefore, there wasn't much cause for worry if someone died as a result of the mining.

It was the House of Montchat and their vassals, the House of Ende, that organized and coordinated these mining efforts. This was also doing the Royal Family's dirty work. That was what it meant to be a shadow.

The Montchat family, who proudly boasted of their bloodline being a cadet branch of the royal family, was said to have kept their marriages within the family in order to keep their lineages pure. Other noble families in the territory followed the lead of their liege lords and did the same.

Of course, this was long ago now.

○

Camilla didn't know much about the history of Mohnton.

She had known that it had a reputation for being a miasma filled bog, though it was a land rich with manastones. What she also had known that its lord was from a branch family of the Royal Family, although that lord very seldom visited from Mohnton, nor did anyone for that matter.

More than anything, Camilla simply had never been interested in Mohnton's past. You could say the same for most of the young daughters of the nobility in the capital. It was an eerie and enigmatic swamp. The lord was a bulbous and ugly toad. Who exactly would be interested in the profundities of a land that could make your skin fester simply through being licked by the wind?

In particular, back when Camilla was still in the capital, there was once a push to find a marriage partner for the head of the Montchat family. 'You seem delightfully enchanted with him, so why not marry?' would be the mocking words she would hear if she ever showed any interest in the Mohnton lands or the Montchat family.

Even when Camilla had been sent to these lands, she didn't care to learn anything further about the House of Montchat or the history of Mohnton. That was only natural. It had been completely against her will. She had no desire to marry that man. She even held a faint hope that everything might be cleared up and she could return to the capital, as much as she would deny that, so she never truly intended to immerse herself in the culture of the Montchat family.

But, she was beginning to rue her lack of studying.

"...I am not a criminal!"

"Of course you ain't. This all happened over a few hundred years ago."

As Günter melted a wad of butter in the frying pan to grease it, he bluntly cut through Camilla's angry shout.

"These days, when a criminal is locked up, that's usually just the end of it. That said, people don't exactly choose to come to a place like this if they can help it. This damp and depressing place."

As he swivelled the melted butter around the pan, he threw on the chopped up onions. A pleasant simmering sound swept through that quiet kitchen.

"Times may have changed, but this place still clings to the past. Everyone's so gloomy and withdrawn, and because of that whole stigma about their ancestors being criminals, fun and bright celebrations are always frowned on. There's no festivals or anything like that around here. Did you know that?"

She didn't.

Camilla shook her head instinctively, despite knowing that Günter couldn't see her with his back turned. She had been in this mansion long enough to understand just how gloomy and withdrawn it was.

But, that didn't tell the whole story.

"Grenze was never half as gloomy as here."

That was the only town that Camilla knew in this land, other than the nearby capital of the territory. The biggest mining town in Mohnton, Grenze. Because of the abundance of manastones being excavated from the nearby swamps, there was a healthy trade over the border, with the merchants' comings and goings adding to a vibrant and energetic atmosphere.

There was a great diversity amongst the people who walked its streets, with foreign visitors from both near and far mingling with each other and the locals. The voices she heard echoing up from the markets during the day were happy and cheerful. It seemed like the complete opposite of what Günter was saying.

"That place is unique."

Placing carved up pieces of chicken, spices and diced mushrooms into the pan one after the other, Günter kept the heat high and he fried them together.

“Grenze has only exploded like that in the past few years. When Lord Alois came to power, he opened the borders and the foreigners poured in after that.”

As the ingredients were tossed together, they began to smell delicious. As she listened to Günter talk, half of Camilla’s mind was thinking about how she could do at least that much herself. The problem was what came next.

After chopping it all up and frying the ingredients together... What came next?

“That’s why Grenze has deep trust in Lord Alois. He would have been pretty loved over there, right?”

“That may be the case.”

Rolf and the old lady who ran the orphanage that she visited in Grenze seemed to know Alois quite well. During that riotous meal that they had, the orphans didn’t seem shy about playing around Alois at all, even swinging around on his arms and legs.

– So they were not simply making light of him?

Although that idea did appear in her head, perhaps instead it was because they trusted him?

“That said, people sure as hell weren’t happy with it in the beginning. Lord Alois had only just become the lord, and he was young, too. There was a bunch of resistance, but he managed to swing them around to his side with some compromises.”

Günter looked behind him and took a small hempen bag left on the kitchen bench. As he opened it up, Camilla saw that it was full of barley. He took a measure of it and added it to the frying pan.

“If you’re alone, there’s always a limit on what you can do. Good thing for that guy, he had a bunch of allies.”

As he said that, he moved over to the pot. Taking a ladle full of the soup from it, he emptied it into the frying pan. Then, he grabbed a measuring jug from the bench. It wasn’t water inside, but condensed milk. After waiting for the soup to cook to his exact preferences, he then added in some of the milk.

As he poured in the milk, the soup in the pan had reduced to a point where a delightful aroma found its way to Camilla’s nose.

– Hmmm.

Camilla kept her hands on her waist without much charm as she stared at him. There was some strange sense of familiarity in Günter’s words, despite it being something that shouldn’t be much of his business.

“You seem to have a spot of sympathy for Lord Alois?”

“That’s right. I said it before, but I’m indebted to him.”

“And just how long have you two been together then?”

“Let’s see... It was about the same time as when he was opening the borders in Grenze. Back then, there were a bunch of things that Lord Alois couldn’t overlook.”

“Oh?”

Camilla said so as she exhaled.

She stared hard at Günter’s back, her eyes determined to know more. That said, there was one thing Camilla wanted to know most of all.

“...So, what did you and Lord Alois do together when you were alone?”

Günter’s shoulders jumped as he turned around like he had been startled by the question.

His wide-eyed expression slowly gave way to a bitter look.

He frowned as his lips bent unhappily, shaking his head.

“I’m just a cook, ain’t I? It’s the only thing I can do anyways.”

“Were you only there just to cook for him? Were you not actually friends?”

“Listen here, you... When it comes to cooking, nobody can make anything as delicious as I can...!”

The irritation he felt from his rude guest was etched on his face. Was it a reaction to having his cooking skill trivialized like that or had he gotten flustered about Camilla hitting the mark? He may have just been angry at Camilla, who acted like she knew everything about him despite just meeting for the first time.

But, Camilla overpowered his frustrations as she pridefully stuck out her chest. The reason why she didn’t feel any intimidation at all was because of her supreme self-confidence.

“When it comes to food, even I can do that.”

“Haa? You were completely lost trying to figure out my soup just a while ago.”

“I have already figured that out.”

Camilla laughed mirthfully despite Günter’s needling comment.

“That peculiar sweetness... It was that wine, was it not?”

The signature product of the House of Storm. A wine that was enjoying even greater popularity this year even found its way to the remote land of Mohnton.

Günter found himself thrown off balance by Camilla’s expression of self-assurance.

He even felt his anger slip away, being faced with that impeccably dignified atmosphere of hers. He absentmindedly stood agape as he looked at her... Yet, although they stood in silence for a while, Camilla didn’t say a word.

It was indeed that exact wine. She had managed to eventually deduce the flavour even though he had only used a few drops in that big pot of soup.

She was correct, but...

“...Is that the only thing you know?”

She only knew about the wine.

How can she act that haughtily with just that?

31

“What did I just say!? Don’t boil the milk! It’ll curdle!”

“I stopped it at the last possible second! It has not boiled!”

“That’s only because I noticed it! You messed up royally the last time you tried it, remember!?”

“I stopped it on my own!!”

“Is that so!? What the hell is wrong with you, huh!? You’ve been acting like you own the place this whole damn time!!”

“Why, you insolent...!!”

That afternoon. After the busy lunchtime service, the cooks had once again vacated the kitchen. Although the kitchen was usually quiet, today it was somehow even louder than during lunch.

Hoisting his heavy body from the dining room, Alois followed the din echoing from the basement, puzzled over what was going on.

Both of those fiercely arguing voices were familiar to Alois as well. One voice belonged to Günter, a cook who had worked for him for many years. The other person was...

“...Camilla? What are you doing here?”

“Ahh, Lord Alois! Perfect timing!”

As soon as he called out to her, Camilla swiftly turned on her heels.

“Please wait there for just a moment!”, she ordered him, taking two dishes from the bench. Then, without giving Alois even a moment to question what she was doing, she began to scoop something into the dishes in front of her

– ...Porridge?

Peering over Camilla’s back, Alois looked at the kitchen’s oven top. There were two shallow bowls and two frying pans. He watched as Camilla used a ladle to dole out thick and lumpy white masses onto the dishes.

What was going on? Alois truly had no idea.

It’s always around this time of day that Günter prepares Alois’ snacks. Well, even if they’re called snacks, this was still Alois. It was still quite a considerable meal by anyone else’s standards, but that’s besides the point.

It was one of Alois’ secret pleasures to taste them in the kitchen before they were properly served to him.

Knowing this was something Alois looked forward to every day, Günter always made sure the kitchen was quiet and ready for him on these secret visits down to the basement.

So, the noise today was deeply unusual. Of course, it was all because of Camilla.

Just what on earth was she doing here?

He thought about that as he looked around the other kitchen countertops bereft of people. There were various ingredients that had been cut into various states and half empty bags of wheat with the tops rolled down. Drops and smears of milk were left on the bench, as if there hadn't been a moment to clean up after themselves.

The stove tops were stained, a sign of rough and tumble cooking. It was completely different to Günter's elegant and clean cookery. Whenever he cooks, he's usually so clean and orderly that by the time the last dish of the service was ready to go to the servers, his station would be so clean it's as if he had already washed it down.

Camilla thrust the two dishes in front of the still confused Alois.

He could smell the gentle aroma of milk from the steam that wafted up, making him imagine a warm taste. Both of the dishes had a serving of porridge and it was hard to see any difference between them. But for whatever reason, they were made in separate pans.

"Which one is more delicious!? Now, if you would!"

Alois blinked as the dishes of porridge were pushed ever closer.

Even Günter looked at Camilla in surprise.

"...Camilla?"

Black hair. A noble girl. A foreigner. The wine. Murmuring, he stared at Camilla with utter disbelief. As if it were something impossible.

"You're the daughter of Count Storm?"

As she heard Günter's words, she turned to him with her chin raised haughtily, flashing a wicked smile.

○

Alois wilted under Camilla's gaze as she held her breath.

Camilla had somehow managed to clear enough space on that dirty kitchen counter for Alois to sit down with the two dishes laid out in front of him.

The dish on Alois' right-hand side was made by Camilla. On the left, Günter's. That said, Alois didn't know about that at all.

He carefully ate spoonfuls of the porridge in front of him, one hesitant sip after another. It felt like Camilla was studying his every facial expression, every time his face so much as moved her expression had a chain reaction as she watched him from the other side of the counter. When he moved onto the second dish, she leaned forwards to watch even more closely. Alois was struggling to keep his cool.

Meanwhile, Camilla couldn't keep herself still either.

Of the two dishes, one of them was made by Camilla. The other by Günter. Even if she's up against a professional chef, she would utterly hate to lose. What's more, Camilla's food was always very popular at the orphanage. She didn't feel like her skills had rusted at all.

There wasn't much difference between the two servings of porridge on a surface level. They used the exact same ingredients as well. They both followed more or less the exact same method too, though that was mostly because of Günter watching her and shouting out when she did something wrong.

Both of them also used far less seasoning than what Alois' meals usually had. It would have still been quite strong for a normal person, but this was still Alois. Although he hadn't succumbed to the pressure of judging yet, he still felt uneasy.

"...I wonder if he can even taste the difference?"

Günter heard Camilla murmuring under her breath.

"Hey you, don't you know about Alois' great sense of taste?"

"This is the first time I have heard of it."

At this point, she wondered if his tongue had become numbed to salt and sugar. But, remembering back when Alois prepared food back at the orphanage, it had been seasoned correctly.

As she continued to stare worriedly at Alois, she pondered over what Günter said. Shifting her eyes towards the cook, Camilla whispered.

"Even though he eats like that, you say he still has his sense of taste?"

"Obviously. Why else do you think Lord Alois comes down to the kitchen like this?"

Why?

Camilla herself had only just notice how out of place Alois looked in this kitchen. Just why exactly had the Master of the house come alone to the kitchen at a time of day where it would usually be almost entirely deserted?

– Was he here to cook by himself?

But in this land, cooking was considered a virtue. Unlike Camilla, who had to keep her hobby a secret, Alois could cook as much as he liked if he wanted to. There was no reason to wait until most of the cooks had left.

"He comes in secret to eat some of my cooking."

"Haa?"

Was he bragging about that? She glared at Günter indignantly, but this wasn't the time to start another fight. Noticing Camilla's stern gaze, he shrugged his shoulders with a smirk.

"Whenever he gets food served to him, it's over seasoned to hell and back. The only way his tongue can remember that taste is by having some of my cooking."

Günter's face began to look thoughtful as he spoke.

“I bet you have a taste you don’t want to forget either, am I right?”

“A taste he doesn’t want to forget?”

Perhaps he’s talking about some kind of memory?

“The taste of my excellent dishes, obviously.”

Camilla felt even more strongly that she couldn’t possibly lose to this arrogant man who could say something like that without a hint of humility.

Just then, they both heard the sound of a spoon being placed onto the counter.

As Camilla and Günter turned around, they saw that Alois had finished eating.

○

So, which dish tasted better?

As Camilla asked him that, Alois shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

He grimaced like he was in deep trouble as he tried to compare Camilla and Günter’s dishes.

“The ingredients are the same, right? The soup for this congee was made by Günter as well, am I correct? Chicken soup with herbs, celery, carrots, onions and a cow bone base? With... olives and red wine to finish?”

“As always, right on the money.”

Günter raised both his hands as if in surrender. Camilla, meanwhile, was already beginning to feel frustrated. As the daughter of a high ranking aristocrat, Camilla was indignant about her tongue having lost out to a man like Alois’.

“They both were made using the same method as well. Stirred through with butter and a milk reduction... Hmm.”

Alois looked lost in thought as he stared at the dishes in front of him. Taking his role of judging seriously, he pondered over it for a long time. Camilla found it hard to stay quiet, impatiently tapping her foot as she fretted over his decision.

“Since both of them were quite delicious, I hope you can forgive me afterward for choosing a winner?”

“That goes without saying.”

Neither of them will be satisfied without a clear winner. As Camilla challenged him with his gaze, Alois sighed. He must have made up his mind.

“...Both are delicious, however... To put it bluntly, the dish on the left has an awful lot of care put into it. I can tell that a lot of attention was paid to the heat so that the taste wouldn’t be spoiled. It’s very well done. As for the right plate, it has a simple yet charming taste. The effort put into making it is plainly obvious... Therefore, this was Camilla’s dish, correct?”

Having said that, Alois opened his palm over the dish on the right. Certainly, the right dish was Camilla’s. He was absolutely correct.

“When it comes to cooking skill, the gulf of those years of experience can be tasted in the dish. But, taste can’t be decided by skill alone... This was the first time I have ever tasted Camilla’s food, wasn’t it?”

Back at the orphanage, because of how much they were being run off their feet, they never had a moment to take even a bite of the food they’d prepared. So, this was the first time Alois had tasted something Camilla had made.

Camilla’s cooking was not bad at all. When she puts her mind to it, there are a great many things she can learn. However, her level of skill cannot yet compare to that of a professional chef’s. Even if children at an orphanage love her cooking, it’s completely different when being evaluated by a man with a clearly refined palate.

Yet still, Alois is gazing at the plate on his right.

“Since this was something that you made, I cannot let it be defeated.”

Camilla’s eyes opened wide in shock.

Günter’s mouth also hung open.

Of course, neither of them could accept that calmly.

“That...”

They both spoke at the same time.

It was when their mouths moved in unison that Alois realized his mistake.

“That is not right! That is not right at all!”

“That’s not it! Young master!”

Even though they’d been at each other’s throats up until now, they suddenly united to scold Alois. Whilst Camilla’s face seemed more remorseful, Günter looked truly hurt. Their expressions were uniformly enraged.

“What you are saying is that even though my dish was worse, you declared it the winner because I made it!? I do not want to win through your favouritism!”

“Young Master! What do you even think about our long friendship!? Do you like this woman who showed up out of nowhere more than me now, huh!?”

“Umm...”

Alois could only smile ruefully.

He wouldn’t have escaped a scolding if he declared them both winners either. Of course, if he said that Günter was the winner, he would have had to suffer through Camilla’s rage as well. If he had lied and said that Camilla’s was genuinely more delicious, she would have ended up more hurt by it. The moment that he was presented with their dishes, Alois had been checkmated.

Even so, this choice that he eventually came to might have actually ended up being the worst one of all.

“It cannot end like this! Günteeer! I demand that you teach me more of your cooking skills! I will absolutely win properly next time!!”

“Hey!? Is that how people ask for a favour where you come from!? You damned bossy villainess!”

“But you call yourself the best, do you not!?”

“Of course, no one is better in the kitchen than me! Ah, jeez, come on then! I’ll show you just how great my skills really are!”

As the two of them shouted back and forth, they walked back towards the oven. It seemed like Alois has already been left behind.

As he listened to the two of them quarrel in silence, Alois smiled again.

Alois’ choice may have been the worst in their eyes... But, perhaps, it wasn’t wholly wrong.

32

The daughter of Count Storm, Camilla Storm, is a horrible woman.

She had inflicted a countless number of hardships on the daughter of a Baron called Liselotte. Using her wiles, she had ensnared the innocent. Once she had her claws in you, she would never let you go. She had first wrapped the First Prince Eckhart around her finger, then she went after Prince Julian.

Everyone in the Mohnton territory, who unwillingly had Camilla pushed upon them, should have been extra careful.

But the Duke of the land, Alois Montchat, had already fallen into Camilla's skillfully laid trap.

Did he surrender to her out of fear? Or was he simply caught unawares by this exiled woman?

In any case, the Duke was now under Camilla's control. The once kind and magnanimous Duke had suddenly fired servants for the most trivial of reasons, and gave their position to someone wholly unsuited to the task. Of course, Camilla was the one pulling the strings behind everything.

After taking over Mohnton, the rumours said that her next goal was to return and take another shot at seizing power in the capital.

The servants in the mansion kept away from her as much as possible, fearful of her earning her ire.

Especially when Camilla was in a foul mood. Everyone working there was utterly petrified that she would throw a tantrum at the drop of a hat and have them fired.

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Four months after arriving in Mohnton.

Today, Camilla's mood really was foul.

It was for a different reason altogether, though.

It was instead because of just how rough her skin had been having it lately.

It was caused by the swamps, not hot and dry air. The sun isn't quite as strong here, so it was gentler on the skin than the warm capital city.

However, the problem with Mohnton was the miasma.

Camilla didn't have much magical power, so she wasn't as susceptible as others to its effects. In fact, she barely noticed it at all when she first came to Mohnton. The first time she truly noticed it was when she visited Grenze, a manastone mining town, where the increased amount of miasma had caused slight aches on her skin.

But even for staying in the town for half a month, Camilla's skin had stayed lustrous and beautiful. Certainly, if she had just let herself be buffeted by those humid winds, she may have been in trouble. However, Camilla diligently looked after her skin every single day. She washed herself with soap, used creams made from herbs and milk, and sprayed olive-scented perfume on herself. So long as she did that much, she wouldn't be affected by the miasma. Or at least, that's what she thought.

After some time, she realized that her skin was beginning to suffer, even after everything she did to protect herself. Somehow, despite the humidity, her skin had begun to dry up. She felt itches in the crooks of her arms and legs. Just the other day, she even found a pimple on her cheek.

She was utterly aghast.

It had to be the fault of the miasma that had been blowing through town that served as the territory's capital throughout the past month.

Originally, this town wasn't nearby any manastone sites. The miasma usually wasn't this strong. Was this because of a shift in wind currents? Or a change in climate? Nobody really knew.

The only thing Camilla knew for certain herself was that if it became stronger, her skin would end up suffering even more for it.

Also, for any person with strong magical power, their grasp over that power will become weaker.

Thanks to that, it seems like the girl called Nicole that Camilla had recently taken on as her personal maid, was going through her own fair share of trouble.

"I wish I could control my magic as well as Lord Alois does."

Nicole said regretfully as she returned, a slight amount of magical power leaking out of her.

As she said that, she unconsciously scratched at her arm hidden by those long sleeves. It seemed like a new habit of sorts for her.

They were in Camilla's room. The wind had picked up a little bit more today, making the miasma even harsher on the skin.

On a day like this, her magical power was liable to be disturbed even more, potentially running amok. Therefore, at times like this, when she felt her magical energy overflowing she would dash out of the room, use up her power somewhere safe, then return.

However, this kind of solution only served as a temporary bulwark and didn't really solve the issue at hand. Just like normal strength, magical power is also restored by resting. So, all that magic will just come back after a night's sleep.

Being able to keep stringent control over their magical power came down to the skill of the wielder themselves. Since Nicole was still inexperienced, she found it very difficult to handle that power of hers properly.

"I am very sorry for causing you so much trouble. The miasma has increased in strength again lately."

– Again, huh?

That would explain why her skin was getting worse and worse these days. It wasn't just Camilla, either. Alois' face was even more pockmarked than usual. It was a smorgasbord of pimples, so much so that she couldn't stand to look at his festering reddened face. If even Camilla, who is so diligent about her looks, was having this much trouble, when she thought about how bad it might get for Alois who didn't seem to care about his appearance at all...

Trying to shake away the thought, Camilla rubbed her temples.

“...Hey, Nicole, are you taking proper care of your skin?”

“Who, me? That kind of thing is sorta...”

Nicole scratched her arm again as she said that. Camilla grabbed her hand as she did it.

Nicole’s shoulders jumped in shock and her body went stiff. There was a faint fear in that freckled expression of hers.

Because of her experience being bullied and used by others, Nicole had a deeper tendency to be frightened around other people much more than normal. But even more than those experiences, what probably caused her fear right now was Camilla’s obviously bad mood lately.

Camilla, though, didn’t care about that at all.

“Ahhh!” She screamed, as she pulled up Nicole’s sleeve and revealed her arm.

“It is completely ruined after all!”

Under that long sleeve. A huge red rash had spread up Nicole’s arm. Around her wrist and the crease of her elbow the red skin and slight scarring were especially bad. It must have been because of the scratching as well that her skin had begun to crack and bleed in places.

“M-Mistress, don’t look at that...!”

Nicole tried to cover her arm with her other hand in a panic. But just as soon as she covered it with her other hand, she impulsively itched at it. Camilla didn’t miss that.

“Stop scratching it! You will make it even worse!”

“Y-Yes! Um...! B-But, what should I do when it’s really itchy!?”

“Endure it!”

Nicole trembled at Camilla’s determined shout.

But, that’s only natural. Just how much effort would it take to clear up that skin of hers?

Looks can only be achieved through effort, after all. Even if the most beautiful person in the world has to take care of themselves, or all their beauty would fall to ruin.

That pretty blonde hair.

That cute, Liselotte-like face.

Yet, she doesn’t decorate her hair at all or make any attempt to hide her freckles. Even though she had a lot more freedom as a senior ranking maid now, she still wore the clothes she had worn as a lower level servant.

“You have naturally good looks, yet you have let yourself go this much!?”

She was talking about Nicole... But, the same could be said for Alois.

○

Simply put, this was the situation.

Alois made no attempt to care for his skin. It just wasn't in his nature to think about things like that.

When the miasma was this strong in the past, she was sure that he didn't do anything to protect himself back then either. Leaving his skin uncared for like that, it was inevitable that it would become rough and toad-like. Instead of just using his magic as an excuse for his poor skin, Camilla thought that he should actually do something about it himself.

To be a man good enough to beat Prince Julian, he couldn't have horrible skin like that. Prince Julian had white and porcelain skin. This was another part of Alois that she had to change.

By now, she had also reduced his amount of meals to five. It seemed like it was time to try and change his attitude as well.

As she forcibly held Nicole still to lather her arm in cream, Camilla planned her next move.

33

“Why did you dismiss those maids without consulting with me first?”

When she was on her way to Alois’ room with a container of cream in her hand that might help his skin condition, Camilla heard a woman’s low voice.

It was a middle-aged woman’s voice, calm but with a coercive air to it. There was something about her tone that made Camilla freeze up on the spot, as if on instinct. From where she was, she could just see the door to Alois’ room and in front of it, she saw two people calmly talking.

She didn’t have to squint to make sure of who it was, either. It was Gerda.

Standing in front of her as if in opposition was Alois. Camilla could only see his massive back, however.

Neither of them seemed to notice Camilla at all. So, they continued the conversation, without raising their voices.

“I personally made the judgement that it was in the best interests of this house.”

“That girl was a legitimate member of the Ende family, she isn’t someone who should be dismissed on personal judgement alone.”

Gerda’s mannerisms didn’t even change when she was face to face with her master, Alois. She stood tall with a straight back and her chin up, that brown hair tinged with streaks of white neatly braided behind her head. With both her hands linked in front of her, she directly faced Alois. Although there was absolutely none of the undisguised hostility she usually directed at Camilla, there definitely was not a friendly air between her and Alois.

“She tormented her colleague to the point that damage was done to the house. Not to mention, she even targeted my guest. Is that not reason enough?”

“When it comes to the damages, it was hardly all that girl’s fault alone. As for the bullying, that is an internal squabble between members of the Ende family. It is not something that Lord Alois should be personally interfering with.”

“It happened in my house, so it’s only natural that I would intervene.”

Neither Alois nor Gerda raised their voice or even had a hint of venom in their voices. However, their locked gazes were beginning to become fiery.

As Alois said that last piece, Gerda simply looked at him in silence. Alois, also, returned her gaze. Camilla felt the atmosphere become even chillier than when they were talking before.

It was Gerda who finally broke that silence.

“...That woman...”

She swallowed the words she was about to say. Before continuing, Gerda averted her gaze, taking a deep breath.

“Lord Alois, you’ve known it yourself for quite some time. Just how much the Ende family has done? Surely you haven’t forgotten.”

“This and that are two different thi-”

“That girl was a bridge between the Montchat and the Ende families. As long as she was here and offered due hospitality, we could trust on the cooperation of and communication with the Ende family. Now that she has gone, we have to seek out an alternative. When there is a hole in the ship, it’s necessary to find a stopgap. Lord Alois, have you truly thought about this?”

Despite how imposing the words were, Gerda spoke calmly. Though she didn’t raise her voice, her speech cut through the silence authoritatively.

“Evaluating the abilities and conduct of the female servants in the mansion and assigning them accordingly is my role. If you are misled and interfere over trivial matters, the management of this house may go awry. In the future, please consult with me first. Thank you in advance.”

Without changing her tone at all, Gerda bowed to Alois. Then, raising her head, she passed right by Alois as if that was the full stop on their conversation. Alois grimaced bitterly as Gerda walked straight past him with her shoulders squared, the expression on her face not moving an inch.

But, Camilla didn’t see that face of his.

When Gerda bowed and moved past Alois, she caught Camilla’s eyes.

When Gerda strode towards the end of the hallway where she stood, was that where she was always going to go? Or was it because Camilla was there? At any rate, she made a beeline straight for Camilla.

And, passed her by. She didn’t drop her speed at all as she breezed straight past Camilla, only sparing her a single glance.

Camilla only caught a glimpse of her face for an instant. And of those eyes that bore a quiet, yet deep, hatred.

She didn’t say a single word. She didn’t stop walking. She barely even breathed.

Yet, those eyes alone sent a chill up Camilla’s spine.

Resentment, Loathing, Envy, Malice. She had been on the receiving end of all those emotions and more back in the capital. Camilla had no shortage of enemies. There were quite a few people who hated her, some of whom made no attempt to hide it. She was used to seeing people’s faces twisted in disgust as they looked at her.

But, the look that Gerda had given her... Was something else entirely.

Her high brows covered those eyes in shadow, with only that dark look looming out of the abyss.

It was after Gerda’s footsteps had echoed into the distance that Alois noticed Camilla standing there, rooted to the spot.

At first, he was surprised, but that turned to worry as he approached the unusually quiet Camilla. His huge frame hadn't changed much at all, but it seemed like the earthquakes caused by his steps didn't shake the floor beneath her feet as much anymore.

It was definitely quieter than before, but Camilla didn't notice it. She still felt that chill gripping her chest.

"Camilla, have you been there long? Did you perhaps see that shameful..."

"Ah, no."

Camilla raised her face with a start.

Before she knew what was happening, Alois stood in front of her.

Recently, despite his huge body still matching his reputation, he was having trouble fitting properly into his regular clothing. So, thanks to the new clothes that had been tailored for him, he cut a slightly refreshing impression.

Unfortunately, Camilla couldn't tell the difference the change from gigantic to enormous. The only reason the servants of the house could notice was that they had spent years living and working around Alois. Meanwhile, that red face of his was festering even worse than before, with the puffy skin around his eyes making him look even more like a toad than usual. For Camilla, he was still far from her ideal.

That pockmarked face of Alois shifted as he grimaced as if he were troubled by something.

"I am deeply indebted to Gerda for everything she does, since she has been handling the day to day tasks of organizing the servants in the mansion for a long time... It's just unfortunate she has that side to her."

As Alois said that somewhat gloomily, Camilla finally let go of the breath she was holding. Thanks to the surprise of having him suddenly appear before her, and that pitiful remark of his, she had finally managed to recover some of her cool.

– She only looked at me for a moment.

She was also merely a servant.

– So, just why did I react like a skittish fawn!?

Her newfound calmness didn't take long to give way to anger. When Gerda's eyes were far away, that fear she felt suddenly seemed illusionary. She felt foolish for ever being cowed by the glare of some middle-aged servant. Since she was staying in Alois' mansion as a guest, even if she was a foreigner, Camilla still ought to be far higher in social rank than someone like her. Just why on earth should she be frightened like that?

"Lord Alois, just who is that Gerda woman?"

Suddenly rounding on Alois rather assertively, Camilla posed that question to him.

"I do not want to believe it, but is she possibly another member of the Ende family?"

There seemed to be no shortage of people from the Ende family in this mansion. Since the Montchat and the Ende were so tightly entwined, you could find members of the latter working all sorts of posts in this mansion. Man or woman, they seemed to be everywhere you looked. As for the ones with that characteristic Ende blonde hair, there were four of them, though she knew the one that definitely wasn't against her.

Gerda's natural hair colour wasn't blonde, but a dark brown. She also had a sharp facial expression, at odds with the usual 'cute' faces of the Ende family. However, judging by the way she spoke, she seemed to have something of an affinity for them. Was she speaking as the head maid of the Montchat family when she emphasized the relationship between them and the Ende or was she speaking as someone who had a relationship with that family herself?

As Camilla's thoughts raced, Alois simply shook his head.

"No, she isn't a member of the House of Ende. Although, her family has been involved with ours for just as long..."

Alois' words trailed off as he was speaking. Just what was he thinking of? He looked into Camilla's eyes, his own looking troubled as he blinked.

"Camilla."

"What... What is it?"

Camilla was a touch taken aback by his sudden seriousness. As Camilla retreated a step, Alois continued to speak.

"Why don't we have you study just a little bit? About the Montchat family, and about this land's history."

No, thank you.

○

Learning about the house you are to marry into is expected of a noblewoman.

They were to become the mistress of that house from then on, after all. If you didn't know about the history, traditions and current circumstances of your husband's family and lands, how could you ever expect to be a good wife?

However, up until that point, Camilla really didn't know much at all about the Montchat family. Alois, too, didn't force her to learn anything either.

That was because, similarly, he had no intention of forcing marriage on Camilla either. Whilst she was officially here as a marriage candidate, Alois had treated her as a guest. If they weren't going to become closer, there was no point in having her learn anything.

But, recently, Alois' attitude had changed. He had begun to see Camilla in a different light after the quarrel in Grenze and the incident with Nicole.

It was as if he really recognized Camilla, and instead of treating her as a mere guest... He wanted to treat her for the reason she came in the first place. So it would seem.

When he said that he would like her to study, that's how she interpreted it.

That's why Camilla found the idea so unpleasant.

– I still need more time.

It had only been four months since her heart was broken and she was exiled from the capital. In a way, quite some time had already passed.

But, compared to the years that Camilla spent loving that man, it was nothing more than an instant.

34

As has been said before, the Montchat are a branch family of the royal family of Sonnenlicht.

Several hundred years ago, the brother of the King at the time began the colonization of the Mohnton territory.

He cleared and cultivated the marshy swamplands of Mohnton, establishing towns and beginning the excavation and export of manastones. In other words, the progenitor of the House of Montchat.

And that founder was served by four key aides. Those four, who accompanied him from the kingdom's capital to help him tame that wild frontier, were granted rank and peerage, with their descendant families serving the Montchat family ever after.

One of them was the Ende family. With a lineage of strong magical power, their house has given rise to many powerful spellcasters over the years.

Another was the Brandt family. They were known for their deft skill and handiwork. It is said that they were the family who played a key role in the development of the manastone mining techniques still used today.

Next was the Lörrich. They were gifted diplomats who served as the Montchat's family's brains.

Finally, the Meyerheim family. Ever since the founding of their family, they had been renowned for their martial prowess, and also served as the head of the four subordinate families.

“...Brandt?”

The two of them sat in Alois' private room in the afternoon. On the table where the cakes from their afternoon tea would usually be piled, instead dusty old books and a fountain pen were laid out. Camilla didn't even have a chance to raise the point of doing something about his rough skin as she listened quietly to the unusually talkative Alois' lecture.

But, when she heard a name that was familiar to her, she couldn't help but interrupt.

“Like Günter Brandt? The cook? That man is actually a noble?”

That can't be, she thought to herself. He was incredibly boorish and crude, there was no way he had any sort of title. He was far more suited to yelling in a kitchen than exchanging pleasantries at a ball.

Alois, sitting opposite to Camilla, nodded as he unfurled a map next to a book with the expanded family tree of the Mohnton nobility.

“Yes. That house were once hereditary baronets. The Brandt family has already collapsed, however, so that title has been revoked. This all happened before Günter was born, so it's hard to see him as much of a noble.”

“Ah... Ha...”

“It was his Great-Grandfather that brought ruin on the house. Apparently, they lost out in a conflict with another family. Afterward, the Brandt family name fell into obscurity. In this land, the family lineage carries even more weight than it does back in the capital.”

Just like how Günter was now, the Brandt family were known to be boisterous yet ultimately good people. They also were unique in how they actively resisted the chains of traditions that bound the families of the Mohnton territory. Yet, their lack of political subtlety and know-how eventually became their downfall.

Their noble rank was also the lowest of the four houses. Needless to say, they never got along with the other noble families. In a way, their downfall was inevitable because of that.

In Mohnton, excluding the fallen Brandt family, the influence of these founding aristocratic houses could not be underestimated. The members of the Brandt family found it hard to find honest livings after their house’s fall, dogged as they were by the new stigma their name held amongst the other houses. They retreated to the shadows, doing their best to live quietly.

It was in that way Alois found Günter. When Alois was originally raised up to a lord, he underwent the customary inspection tour of the region, and by sheer coincidence Günter was working as a chef in a restaurant he happened to eat at.

“In this land, you can roughly estimate a family’s standing by their hair colour. In the case of the Brandt family, their red hair always stands out.”

Alois admired the level of skill that went into the dish he ate and asked to meet the chef straight away. The person who emerged from the back of the kitchen was a rough looking man with bright red hair, characteristic of the Brandt family.

He was the eldest son of the direct heir to the Brandt lineage. His name was Günter Brandt.

“It would have been a shame if he just wallowed in obscurity like that. The Brandt family had always been known for their dexterity and skill, after all. I thought that he could help me with a lot of things, not just cooking.”

However, for better or worse, that’s not how it turned out. Ever since their downfall, the Brandt family had dedicated themselves to the profession of cooking. All the extended family members were living in hiding in the city, but once Alois found out about this he allowed them to openly run their own restaurants. Alois’ plan to employ their skilled fingers for all sorts of means may have fallen through, but he was still a saviour to the Brandt family.

– So that’s why he said that he was indebted.

As she listened to Alois’ story, Camilla remembered what Günter had said back in the kitchen. Maybe he wasn’t bluffing when he said that he could ‘make restaurants quake’ after all? If he had an entire kitchen of family members just like his loud self in the kitchen, it was possible.

Hmph, Camilla rested her hand on her cheek as she breathed out. Seeing that he had managed to gain her interest on at least one key point, Alois’ expression was caught somewhere between satisfaction and relief.

“The Brandt family were merely baronets, but the other families are of higher rank. The Ende and Lörriich families are both baronial houses. The head of the Meyerheim family has always been a viscount. Because each family prefers not to mix their blood as much as possible, these houses always have their own unique physical characteristics in their offspring’s hair. The Brandt family are redhaired. The Ende family are a golden blonde. The Lörriich are light brown. Whilst the Meyerheim are a chestnut brown instead. Naturally, there are sometimes exceptions.”

Hmm hmm, Camilla thought about the hair colour of the servants in the mansion as she nodded along.

Certainly, a lot of the servants could be classified by the hair colours Alois had mentioned. In particular, the more senior level employees. Amongst the senior employees, the highest proportion of them were from the Ende family. After that, the Meyerheims. She couldn’t think of anyone with that particular brand of light brown hair though.

Except for...

The one who always stood tall. The one who always glared at Camilla. The one whose eyes never concealed their loathing. Brown hair streaked with strands of grey, braided tightly behind her head. The image of a woman who seemed to have a perpetual scowl floated through her mind.

“...Then, Gerda is a member of the Lörriich family, is that it?”

“Yes. She’s the older sister of the current head of the House of Lörriich. True to her family’s fame, she’s skilled in politics and has no qualms about voicing her views. That said, she’s also very firm and inflexible.”

To say that she had her differences with and objections to Camilla would be an understatement. Gerda was a person fully wrapped up in the age-old familial traditions of this land.

The bitterness she felt towards Camilla stemmed from the deep respect for the customs handed down through the families of Mohnton. As a result, they had a deep distrust for outsiders. These were families that jealously guarded their bloodlines, after all, only intermarrying within their own houses. No matter how high their peerage may have been wherever it was they come from, they had no love for anyone who came from outside the territory.

– But, this is taking it too far.

The other servants merely talked about Camilla behind her back. However, Gerda didn’t pretend to hide her hostility and would often tell Camilla exactly what she thought of her. Wasn’t this really going far further than merely being ‘firm’?

“Did that catch your interest?”

As he watched Camilla’s face twist in doubt, Alois flipped over a page of the family tree. On the page he showed her was a complete record of all the successive heads of the Lörriich, complete with the length of their tenures and a list of their achievements. It was a history book that was written cover to cover in the finest of print. As he pressed it towards her, Alois smiled at Camilla as if he had been practicing it in a mirror.

“We can study into the night. This land has such a long history, so there’s so much the two of us can talk about.”

As Alois’ eyes, surrounded by puffy toad-like skin, twinkled as they stared at her, Camilla shook her head.

I’m sorry, I’d rather not.

○

I’m sorry, she had said.

But Camilla’s refusal had been in vain, as from then on her afternoon tea time with Alois instead became study sessions.

35

In the territory of Mohnton, there were five major cities, including the capital.

The capital was located in the southern reaches of the Duchy. In the east, there was Falsch. Blume lay in the west. To the north, Grenze. And finally, almost dead in the centre of the territory, there was the town of Einst. Of course, there were smaller towns, hamlets and villages spread out between these major towns.

Each of the noble founding families had varying degrees of influence in these major towns.

Of course, the Montchat family held the most sway in the capital.

Falsch, a prosperous mountain town that thrives on magical research and technology development, was the power base of the Ende family.

Blume was under the protection of the House of Lörrich. Known in the territory for its relatively agreeable climate, its main exports sprang from the very profitable perfume business ran there.

In the past, Grenze was under the control of the Brandt family, but that's no longer the case. Due to its manastone mining and new trading opportunities, it had grown into one of the biggest towns in Mohnton over the past ten years.

Before Grenze's rise, Einst was the largest town behind the capital. Equally famous for manastone mining, this town under the control of the Meyerheim family still continues the mining operations.

Did Alois study so hard that he could just imagine a completed map of this land in his mind?

For Camilla, meanwhile, she felt like she had studied more over the past month than she had in a lifetime.

Was it Gerda that had called Alois diligent before? It's aggravating to agree with her, but she can't help but concede that point. If anything, Alois is too diligent. It was as if he was hopelessly in love with studying.

If only he devoted some of that passion to improving his appearance a little more instead.

But the dispirited Camilla could only think about that begrudging remark, as she suffered through another study session with Alois.

○

A chilly wind whistled through the open window.

In the Montchat residence where winter had well and truly arrived, taking a morning or afternoon meal out in the courtyard was something more akin to a punishment. So, the two took them in Alois' private room instead, whilst they had their study session.

From the very founding of the Mohnton territory all the way until the present day. Alois' lectures seemed to go on forever. Judging by the history lessons, it doesn't seem there had been too much advancement in Mohnton until recent years. Alois tried to get Camilla engaged and interested by

sometimes striking up conversations about the topics he was talking about with her, but she was struggling to wrap her head around the huge amount of information he was presenting.

How on earth have you memorized all this? As Camilla spat that out in complaint, Alois laughed with a troubled-looking smile.

“My parents always wanted me to become a proper lord.”

So to that end, he set out to learn everything there was to know about the territory of Mohnton.

Alois’ parents had long since passed away. So in a sense, he was following something like their last wishes, though he was a little embarrassed to admit it.

What’s more, during their study sessions, Alois was so passionate about teaching Camilla that he usually forgot to eat anything. In a roundabout way, all of this fit perfectly into Camilla’s plans to reduce Alois’ diet and make him into a more handsome man.

– Well, one could say that.

Deceiving herself into thinking that this was her plan for these miserable study sessions all along, that cold wind tickled her face as it peeled through the room.

She thought that the numbness she felt on her skin afterwards was due to the chill, but the sensation was oddly different. The tingling on her cheeks felt similar to a slight burn on her skin.

“...The miasma in the air has become even stronger.”

Camilla said that quietly, as she touched a hand to her numbed cheek.

She heard that it was the fault of a bout of bad weather, but over the past several months there hadn’t been any sign of the miasma weakening at all. If anything, even Camilla who had no real magical power to speak of was beginning to feel the effects of the miasma more vigorously than before.

And whilst obviously the incidences of Nicole breaking things due to being unable to control her magical power were on the rise, she had noticed that other servants with some magical power were beginning to suffer from the same as well.

For Camilla, though, the main issue was the effect on her skin. Since Camilla wasn’t acclimatized to the weather of Mohnton, she seemed to suffer more compared to others around her level of magical power. The cream she had been using was becoming less and less effective in keeping her skin from drying out and becoming rough, so it was becoming a real headache for her.

At the moment, she didn’t even have time to worry about Alois’ skin condition. She had to put herself first.

How can she possibly convince Alois to look after himself if she was in such a state? That was Camilla’s line of thought. For now, her number one priority was to find a way to find some sort of makeup or cream that could stop the looming disaster threatening her skin.

Meanwhile, Alois had no idea about Camilla’s inner turmoil.

“You’re right about that. I thought that it wouldn’t last long, but it really doesn’t seem to show any signs of stopping.”

Whilst Camilla had spoken quietly, Alois, in contrast, had a grim expression. Unlike Camilla, his worry had nothing at all to do with skin care troubles.

“Something could potentially happen at one of the mines. I’ve already sent word to Grenze and Einst to cease mining operations there and keep everyone away from the manastone veins. It might be necessary to evacuate soon, not to mention all the other smaller mining towns.”

The manastone veins. When she heard that, Camilla remembered the two foremost mines in Mohnton that had been drilled into her head during the study sessions.

The first was Grenze. The manastone vein in Grenze was located in the depths of a swamp. Since the manastone are simply extracted out of the single marsh, it’s easy to understand exactly where the vein flowed.

The other was the manastone vein at Einst. Just like Grenze, it was located in the deepest part of the swamps. However, unlike Grenze, Einst had mined swamps dry in their desire for manastones in the past. It wasn’t possible to easily judge exactly where the original vein was anymore. They would have to make a rough estimate based on the swamp that was currently being excavated as well as the positions of the previous ones in the records.

“When new manastones are mined, it increases the amount of miasma released into the air. It’s a commonly held belief that the miasma that escapes into the air once a manastone is excavated is actually the remains of spirits that couldn’t crystallize into the stone. That miasma can have terrible effects on people with high magical powers as well people like that may completely lose control if they carelessly came into contact with it.”

Camilla had heard from Alois that in times gone by, many people died in accidents as a result of manastone mining.

Wherever there are manastones, there is inevitably a high degree of magical energy. When those magical energies clashed together, the results could prove fatal. The magical power of the manastones, the magical miasma in the air and the magical power of the human beings themselves. Deadly accidents when these forces came into violent clashes with each other in the past were too numerous to list off.

The miasma spouting from the manastone excavation sites wasn’t as powerful as it was in the distant past, however, and identification of manastone veins had advanced. When it comes to the mining operations themselves, accidents had sharply decreased due to a practice of keeping someone skilled in magic with the miners, in order to watch for spikes in magical energy that could lead to an accident. Still, though, the danger couldn’t be eliminated entirely.

“Manastones may be useful, but they’re also dangerous at the same time... I really hope that I’m just worried about nothing.”

Alois breathed those words out gloomily, as he looked towards the open window.

The dark clouds that covered the miasma filled sky stretched out far beyond the horizon of that swampy land.

36

“There was a disaster in Grenze!?”

Alois’ office, deep into the afternoon. Camilla repeated the words she had just been told in abject shock.

Alois glanced up at Camilla from behind the massive pile of reports on his desk.

“More specifically, it was between Grenze and Einst. At some point where their two manaveins intersected. We don’t know exactly where that epicentre is just yet, though.”

There were all sorts of letters and reports on the extent of the damage stacked up in front of Alois. She couldn’t read the roughly scrawled handwriting in the messages, but somehow Camilla knew that this was something far out of the ordinary.

The disaster had occurred the morning before. Camilla remembered being rudely awoken with a start as what felt like an earthquake shook the foundations of the mansion. Half asleep, she had originally thought that it was Alois exercising, but after seeing the general panic amongst the mansion’s servants afterward she realized it was something else.

As soon as the earthquake hit, Alois sent out riders towards the major mining towns. Then, he waited anxiously for a full day. And now, Alois was gazing at the reports in front of him, his face twisted bitterly.

“It really was due to an accidental explosion in the manastone veins after all. However, the miasma is still thick. I don’t think the danger has passed yet.”

“An explosion... Just what do you mean by that!? What of Grenze!? The orphanage!?”

“I don’t have the full details yet. But from what I can gather, the damage hasn’t spread that far. There were some collapses around the mines and a few houses fell down, but thankfully there have only been reports of light injuries so far.”

Camilla breathed a sigh of relief at Alois’ words, but she still felt gripped by that same anxiety. Houses falling down and injuries. Camilla was worried that the people she had gotten to know there might have become caught up in things.

The old woman who ran the orphanage and those cheeky kids. Even those disagreeable maids. Were they all safe?

As Camilla’s gaze dropped to the floor in her worry, Alois continued.

“I’ll also be going to assess the damage and offer some help to what victims there might be. I also need to investigate the source of this incident as well. Just where along the veins did the disaster start? That’s something I need to find out.”

Alois’ magical power was useful at times like this.

Typically, searching for the manastone veins and their roots was a job given to a person with strong magical power. Because of their deeper connection with the magical energies being given off by the vein, they can follow the fluctuations in the magic of the manastones.

That way, they can pinpoint just where the magic and miasma was at its strongest. In the old days, if someone was trapped underground in a manastone mine due to something like a cave in, it was standard practice to break open a manastone. That was because the sudden release of large amounts magical energy could be followed by a magic user on the surface.

Conversely, miners in the dark can be guided by a magic user on the surface releasing magic. When it came to mining operations, there were always two such people. It was an unbreakable rule to have one magic user above the ground and the other under.

This time, however, the search wasn't for a person trapped underground, but the epicentre of this incident. That doesn't change the fundamentals of the task, though. By following the flows and fluctuations of the miasma that hadn't dissipated, he would be able to find the point of the accident.

Especially since this time, the accident happened in a spot where the manaveins from Grenze and Einst intersected. With these two different types of miasma coming into collision, it would be difficult to be able to ascertain one from the other.

For this investigation, someone with strong magical power was necessary. In addition, it would have to be a person with a very strong handle on their powers, so that they wouldn't be overwhelmed by the thick miasma themselves.

The only person who could truly be qualified for such a task was Mohnton's strongest magic user, Alois.

"I'll be leaving once I get the final report. That should be a few days from now. Once I set off, I might not be back for a while. I know it might be inconvenient for you, Camilla, but whilst I'm gone—"

I'll be relying on you. Before he could say those words, Camilla interrupted him.

"I am going to go as well!"

"...Have you been listening up until now?"

Alois looked at her dubiously. His face was a mix of amazement and incredulity, a mask of emotion that was hard to pin down with a single word.

"Even though the damage so far was minor, there is still a large amount of miasma and I cannot guarantee that it will be safe at all."

"I heard you. However, I will still be going with you, Alois."

"I'm going to investigate and console families that have lost their homes. It's not a sightseeing tour."

"I too have no intention of playing around!"

Camilla strongly denied Alois' insinuation. Having a thoughtless jaunt at a time like this was absolutely not Camilla's intention. She needed him to at least understand that much.

“Grenze is a town that I came to know. I have no intention of getting in your way, but if part of your reason to go is to console people, then it wouldn’t be strange for me to be there alongside you, would it!?”

Even if Camilla still has her qualms about it, officially she is supposed to one day be Alois’ wife. It was not uncommon for noble couples to visit strife afflicted areas in such a way.

Besides, visiting as a couple could project a better image to the people of the land. The sooner the better, too. Since it gives the people there the impression that they’re so well thought of that the lord of the land rushed there as soon as he could, alongside his partner.

Of course, when the disaster is a massive catastrophe, there were issues with that. When even a single person who cannot pull their own weight is a burden, there is no place for a noblewoman in her long and elegant dress to come along. In such a case, their consolation visits would have to wait until the situation had calmed down.

However, going by Alois’ words, the damage this time was not so extensive. Therefore, it shouldn’t be any problem if Camilla came along. If anything, he should be pleased that she would.

Yet despite Camilla’s thoughts, Alois’ expression remained grim as he shook his head.

“I am not just travelling to Grenze. In fact, I will definitely be stopping in Einst before moving on to Grenze.”

Grenze was the northernmost town in the territory. The capital where they were now was in the south. Einst lay squarely in between them. To travel to both these places from the capital, one would inevitably visit Einst first before moving on to Grenze.

But, that wasn’t the only reason he intended to visit Einst first.

“Camilla, if you really wish to visit Grenze, you would have to pass through Einst first. In any case, Einst is the priority right now. Otherwise, I may have problems convincing the elders in Einst.”

The frown on Alois’ frog-like face became even more pronounced.

○

Einst was the second largest town outside of the capital in Mohnton.

It used to be the largest.

‘Complicated’ is the word that was often used to describe the town under the dominion of the Meyerheim family, entangled as it was in deeply rooted history and traditions.

When it came to manastone mining, it actually had a higher output than Grenze.

The town could be described as modest and chaste, far removed from the rough and tumble style seen in Grenze. It followed the customs handed down generation to generation from the time that it was a criminal colony’s mining outpost, so although it had now developed into a large town, you would be hard pressed to find anything resembling festivities there. There were no bars, either. The restaurants were as quiet as a place of worship, with the patrons simply eating their meals in silence. Clothes with

ostentatious or evocative colours were frowned on and brightly coloured flowers weren't ever grown there.

It was a town that was focused purely on the mining and export of manastones. Yet that town, modest and honest to a fault, was stripped of its pre-eminence by the vitalization of Grenze.

The influential men in the town were hardly comfortable with this, either.

Grenze was flooded with foreign merchants. Grenze was a hive of boozing, debauchery and violence. Grenze's development was due to Alois. All of these things went hand in hand, and they disapproved of them all.

However, supplanted as it was, a mining town of that size could hardly be ignored. Mohnton was a land that relied on manastone exports for its main source of revenue, after all. If Einst threw their toys out of the pram, nearly half of the manastone exports would be in jeopardy. The blow to the economy of the Duchy would be unthinkable.

Moreover, Einst had a high amount of influence on a number of surrounding smaller towns. It had a deep connection to the House of Meyerheim also. Most of the town's influential men were directly under the patronage of the family in one way or another. If he moved carelessly in this manner, it could be considered an insult to the Meyerheims themselves.

Einst was strange in that it had both an inferiority complex about and a sense of superiority to Grenze.

The focus of the Montchat family had to be on Einst. Even if Grenze eventually surpassed it in revenue, Einst would still have to be the first priority, if only because of its political importance.

Therefore, visiting Grenze first would be a huge mistake. He couldn't let Camilla only visit Grenze alone either. Anything that Grenze received, Einst would have to receive it first.

○

"Einst is a very insular type of place. They don't exactly have a great impression of me, either. Camilla, it may be uncomfortable for you there."

"For such a ridiculous reason!?"

Camilla shook her head without hesitation as Alois tried to talk her down. She felt even more determined to go now.

"Did you truly think I would stop wanting to go simply because it was 'uncomfortable'!?"

She hadn't felt much other than being uncomfortable ever since she got here. How much discomfort does he think she has actually gone through up until now?

Even so, nothing would get solved if she just fled from the things she found unpleasant, whether she liked it or not. In the first place, Camilla had never thought something like 'I don't want to go to Einst, only to Grenze' at all.

If Camilla married into the Montchat family, she would inevitably have some sort of relationship with Einst. Therefore, no matter what, she's determined to go.

– What’s more...

Something stirred in Camilla’s heart. She remembered something that the cook Günter had said to her.

Alois had originally faced great opposition when he sought to revitalize Grenze. Ernst was a town that felt hard done by the development in Grenze as well. If their relationship with Alois wasn’t smoothed over now, even though ten years had already passed it would only get worse and worse.

They would surely regard Alois with coldness. Perhaps it would even be worse than the treatment Camilla received.

“Lord Alois, even though you will surely suffer some unpleasanties during the trip, you still intend to go don’t you?”

At Camilla’s words, Alois bent his mouth into a hollow smile. Perhaps he was smiling in self-derision? He sighed as he finally responded.

“...I am a lord, after all.”

“Then, isn’t it my role to support you!?”

Alois’ quietly spoken words were swallowed up by Camilla’s determined shout.

As Alois blinked in surprise, Camilla stood up tall with her hands on her waist and her chest puffed out.

Even more than all that... Camilla wanted to cut Günter down to size just a little bit.

Just what exactly did he and Alois do when they were alone together?

Was he really trying to sell himself as the only person truly supporting Alois?

Camilla’s pride couldn’t permit something like that to slide.

37

The center of Mohnton is dominated by an expansive marsh, split into innumerable smaller swamps. People talked about how these swamps were being heated by excess amounts of miasma, causing them to bubble and froth on the surface.

The stagnant marshes reached deep into the earth and had a feral green colour to them. Common grasses and flowers never grew around them, only poisonous and toxic plants and herbs imbued with the magic of the miasma instead. In the shadows of the poisonous plants, brown toxin-resistant toads hopped through the swamps.

This kind of sight is what foreigners who have never been to Mohnton imagine when they think of the territory and is also the origin of Alois' unfortunate nickname, the 'Toad of the Swamp'.

The areas between the swamps were dominated by muddy wetlands covered in moss.

There were no valleys or hills, the land was almost uniformly flat. A vast amount of shallow rivers and streams crisscrossed the landscape, only adding to the damp and humid nature of the land. The land itself was cracked in places, so this water found no shortage of ways to seep into the earth.

Einst was a town built on a large piece of land that was reclaimed from the bogs. By splitting up and draining the swamps, it was possible to dry out the land enough to build houses and roads. The town took on a strange shape as a result, becoming as oval-shaped as the swamp it was originally reclaimed from.

Houses constructed from packed earth and mud lined the streets of the town. The houses had no personality whatsoever, so for an outsider, it was impossible to tell one from another at a glance.

The main street was eerily quiet, without the cheers and shouts of children playing or the gossip of women going shop to shop. The men who were heading out to the swamps to their mining jobs would silently step in time through the streets like soldiers on a march.

In that way, life in this town had continued unchanged for over 200 years.

At first glance, it was a place incredibly strict in their ways, valuing modesty above all. An old town that put pragmatism before feelings.

However, in the hearts of the people, there was a certain pride that gave way to an insidious sort of pleasure.

○

– It's all so strange.

Camilla frowned as she looked at the town of Einst.

The sky was overcast and the streets were shadowed by dark grey clouds. The miasma was even stronger than in the capital, just being outside hurt her skin. The wind that blew off the rooves of the old earthen houses was desperately cold, making the winter air even more unbearable.

Camilla was staying at another one of the Montchat's residences in Einst. It was a stone mansion on the main street. To put it simply, Alois eventually had to give in to Camilla's demands.

After they were finished visiting the victims in Einst, they would move on to Grenze. Once their visit to Grenze was complete, the investigation into the manastone veins could begin. Whether that took a few days or a few weeks, Alois was determined to find the source of the disaster using his magical power.

At the moment, Alois was busy greeting the influential men in the town. Rather than quickly breezing through the greetings from the members in the room, he was held up listening to the complaints of each and every one of them individually. She couldn't help but think it was some form of harassment.

A few days had already passed since the disaster struck. As far as she could tell, there weren't any real implications of damage to the town.

According to what they had heard, the damage hadn't occurred at a mining site, but deep inside a forest that people rarely entered. Although a magical explosion had occurred underground at wherever the disaster site might be, the main issue was the earthquake caused as a result. Not to mention the release of vast amounts of miasma. Apparently many trees had been toppled and a lot of the wildlife suffered. Yet whilst it had caused a dreadful fright, it was quite a distance away from the populated towns and villages in this area so the damage to person and property was minimal. There was one house in town that collapsed due to the earthquake and several people with high magic power were involved in accidents due to the miasma, but other than that, the town was unharmed.

For how big a fuss was made about all of this, it was quite anti-climatic. But in the end, it was a good thing that no one was seriously hurt. Since Einst was in this condition, Grenze was probably fine as well so Camilla felt relieved.

However, she had other problems to think about now.

"Mistress! I cannot believe how rude the people here are!"

Nicole, Camilla's personal maid, was incensed. She couldn't bear to keep quiet about it as she combed Camilla's hair.

"We weren't ready to receive you', what a bad excuse! What are they thinking, making you stay in such a poor room like this!?"

A room in the north wing of the mansion with no curtains on the windows. It was the worst guest room available in the Montchat's residence in Einst. When they were given this room to stay in because all the other rooms 'weren't ready', Nicole had actually gotten angrier than Camilla.

"We didn't think you would truly come' they said!? Jeez!"

"Ow ow ow ow!!"

As Nicole angrily combed Camilla's hair, she absent mindedly pulled the comb through harder than necessary. Although she had gotten slightly defter lately, it seemed like she still needed more practice.

"Anyways! They haven't even cleaned this room at all!?"

Nicole sighed heavily, not noticing Camilla yelping in pain.

Like Nicole said, it didn't look like the room had been given any care for a while. Just how long had it been since it last saw a guest? It was covered in dust and smelled faintly of mould. Had the room really been touched at all before she arrived? It seemed like only the bed was still in a usable state, not that it was particularly good quality though.

It was obvious that she was being treated coldly. Usually, at this point, Camilla would be smouldering in anger at the slight and might have even tossed a pillow across the room.

But, right now, Camilla was different.

"How dare they treat the lady of the House of Montchat like this!? I won't ever forgive theAAAAHHMM!?"

With a scream, the comb in Nicole's hands exploded. The wooden comb broken into pieces, its loose remains falling through Nicole's fingers.

Nicole's unstable magic power had run loose yet again.

Since her power was so strong, she was more susceptible to the miasma than most. When her emotions get the better of her, even over little things, she had the tendency to lose control of her power.

Whether that trivial thing was something physical like being overly tired or simply something triggering strong feelings within her.

This time, that poor comb reduced to pieces had been the victim, as Nicole's anger made her lose control.

That was the third one in a day, by the way.

"Nicole! What are you doing!?"

"Yes! My apologies!"

"Stop getting angry at every little thing! Have a little composure, will you!? Controlling your magical power is part of your job!"

Camilla scolded Nicole in a way that would make any onlooker think she was being hypocritical since Camilla herself was angry as well, but that's another matter entirely. Even if Camilla was utterly furious, she didn't have magical power enough to overflow and potentially injure someone. Also, if Camilla only ever practiced what she preached, she probably wouldn't ever have room to scold anyone.

Right now, though, Camilla was putting up a front so that she could properly lecture Nicole.

Truth be told, she was very angry.

The attitude of 'you really ought not to have come' that she was greeted with when she arrived enraged her the most. When she arrived, even the manservants didn't help her with the luggage because 'no one was assigned to help you, since we weren't expecting you here'. Meanwhile, the maids did their utmost to avoid Camilla completely. Eventually, they were shunted into this horrible room.

Deep down, Camilla's anger easily surpassed Nicole's. Camilla had always been short-tempered, after all. She didn't actually know how long she could truly keep a lid on her feelings if this was how she

was going to be treated in Einst. If she suddenly yelled out ‘You’re all fired!’, who knows what lies and half-truths they would spin for Alois against her.

Yet, despite her frustration, because of Nicole losing her temper, she has had to keep her own rage buried. When Nicole gets angry, her magical power ran wild. When it did, things had a tendency to get destroyed. Since she was the only one here who could calm Nicole down, if Camilla lost herself to anger as well, things could get out of hand.

So ever since they arrived in Einst, Camilla had tried to stay calm, if only for Nicole’s sake.

In a dejected mood, Nicole glumly swept up the remains of the comb. As she watched Nicole sweeping the floor, Camilla frowned.

– I might have made a mistake in bringing her.

Was it a misjudgment to bring Nicole along to accompany her, knowing the miasma would be even worse than back in the capital?

But, other than Nicole, Camilla didn’t have any maids she could rely on at all. In fact, she didn’t think there was anyone other than Nicole that she could have brought in the first place. It wasn’t as if the maids in Einst were going to be pleased to help her with the way things stood currently, either.

Nicole who was a ticking time bomb or the maids who would do their job efficiently but despise her, which one was truly better?

– Nicole is a good distraction, at least.

If Camilla’s treatment in Einst was to be as cold as the reception she got in Grenze, there might eventually be problems. But because she was constantly having to deal with Nicole’s problems, she sometimes forgot about the burning anger and frustration swirling in her heart.

It might be a hassle, but in a way, it was also a small comfort. So in that sense, it wasn’t too bad.

– I wonder if that’s really true?

“I-I’m deeply sorry!”

Nicole’s apologies broke her train of thought, as the broom in her hand exploded with a popping sound.

This time, it seemed like the broom became a victim of her depressed mood.

Camilla sighed as she looked at the remnants of the wooden broom in Nicole’s hands.

38

Unfortunately, everyone has their limits.

“I have to stay in a place like this!?”

It was the second day of their stay in Einst.

Camilla, who was intending to leave to go along with the consolation visits, yelled that at the servant who was blocking her from exiting through the door.

Alois and his retinue had already departed. Apparently, they had to leave beforehand in order to hold talks or an inspection, something along those lines.

When leaving, she remembered Alois giving her a look she found suspicious. ‘I am going ahead, please don’t do anything rash’ was what he had said to her. Looking back, she realized Alois must have been aware.

Don’t get angry, stay calm and think rationally. If something happens, send a messenger. If there are any strange fluctuations in the miasma, leave the town at once and head towards the forest... That was all well and good for him to say. Alois’ advice before he departed must have predicted Camilla’s current state.

– If you knew that this was going to happen, then why not just take me with you!?

At the very least, if he had warned her properly, she might have been ready to cope with it. Was Alois, one who often kept a wall around himself, still keeping her at a distance? As if he didn’t trust her with his true thoughts?

But right now, Alois wasn’t the real target of her anger. The two male servants and the older woman standing front and center before her were the bigger nuisances in her mind.

“I came here for a consolatory visit! If I have to stay cooped up here, then what was the point in me even coming!?”

“The people of this town you’ve come to visit don’t know anything about you.”

The old woman spoke firmly. She may be leaning heavily on that cane with a hunched back, but it seemed like her mind was still strong. Her wrinkled face looked stern and her grey hair was tightly braided behind her head.

She was one of the most influential people in this town. Her name was Martha and she was the chief advisor to the mayor. As the younger sister-in-law of the current head of the Meyerheim family, she was also an aunt to Vilmer, the head butler back at the Montchat estate.

“If this was Grenze, then perhaps the people might recognize you. However, this is your first visit to the town of Einst. If a woman who they had never seen before suddenly appeared, the townsfolk may be confused.”

“Are you upset because I went to Grenze first!?”

It was utterly unreasonable and narrow-minded. Camilla glared at the old woman as she thought so, but Martha's expression didn't change at all.

"No, not at all, I am merely telling you the facts about how the people in this town feel."

Martha's tone wasn't harsh, but she spoke with an air of indifference. The two manservants flanking her didn't react at all to the conversation, as if they were dolls.

Because of that disquieting attitude, Camilla's anger only grew.

"This town doesn't know you as a person at all. All we know are your circumstances, such as how you were exiled from the capital of the kingdom. Even if the villain who interfered with the love story between Prince Julian and Lady Liselotte came for a consolatory visit, the townsfolk would only distrust you."

"...What did you say?"

"I am trying to explain to you just how you will be seen by the people in this town. That doesn't mean those are my personal feelings. However, the townsfolk here undoubtedly see you as a villainess of sorts. A woman full of base cunning who tormented Lady Liselotte and was exiled from the capital, now using her evil wiles to take advantage of Lord Alois who is still inexperienced around women."

Camilla was at a loss for words. As the absolutely undisguised barrage of insults struck her head on, Camilla's shoulders trembled. She had come to this town prepared for some level of unpleasantness, but to not get angry about something like this was beyond her. Blood rose to her head and only curses swam through her mind.

How boorish!? How dense!? How impertinent!? How utterly unbelievable...!?

"...You rude old woman!"

Before Camilla could shout out, a high pitched voice cut through the air. Nicole jumped out from behind Camilla and screamed that at Martha. As she stepped forward, it looked like she was about to reach out and grab Martha's collar.

"How dare you say something like that to the Lady of the Montchat family...!"

But, her hand was grabbed by both the manservants that flanked Martha. As they gripped her arm with excessive amounts of strength, Nicole's grimaced in pain as she cried out.

"Please refrain from such barbaric behaviour in this town."

"Let Nicole go at once!"

"As you wish."

At Camilla's demand with a yell, the two manservants obeyed. Releasing Nicole's arm without a moment of hesitation, they returned to where they stood. Compared to their calm and cool behaviour, Camilla was beginning to see red as the heat gathered in her head.

As Nicole staggered backwards and Camilla caught her in an embrace, she raised her voice.

“Just what makes you people think that you will get away with this!?”

The rigid and wizened old woman, Martha, bent over her cane. The servants on her left and right, of which you could see their strong muscles underneath their coats. Martha’s hair had completely greyed, but the two manservants still had the same shade of brown hair that was unique to the Meyerheim family. They stood expressionless as well. The man on the right was slightly taller than his fellow and the only one on the left had a beauty spot under his eye. Their skin was so white and smooth that she could have mistaken it for a mask.

Camilla committed all of their faces to her mind. By all means, she was going to tell Alois everything about this. Camilla wasn’t one to forget a grudge, after all.

“You ought to hope that Lord Alois’ trip today never ends! Because once he gets back, all of you will be disposed of!”

“Shall you be taking my head then?”

Martha said that plainly in response to Camilla’s angry shout, causing her to frown at the suddenly severe words.

Martha looked into Camilla’s eyes as she leaned on her cane.

“Although I was only telling you how the people in this town felt, if you feel insulted, then it cannot be helped. This old woman will offer you her head. Yes, all I did was convey the feelings of the town, but even though it wasn’t my intention, I’ve clearly committed an unforgivable crime.”

You are the narrow-minded one. Martha didn’t say it, but that was the clear intent behind her words. It was an indirect thrust against Camilla, who thought that way of Einst herself. Feeling the very depths of that ill-will, Camilla felt a shiver run up her spine.

“After you take off my head, the townsfolk will only fear you more. But if I didn’t say a word, that wouldn’t change how people in this town saw you either. Everyone working in this mansion feels the same way.”

Martha raised her head and indicated their surroundings with her chin. Looking behind her, Camilla could sense that the scene in the entrance hall was being watched by a myriad of eyes.

From the corridor, on the other sides of doors and behind the pillars. The servants held their breath, closely watching the confrontation between Martha and Camilla.

None of them said a word. None of them moved a muscle. It was as if they were acting as a monolith under some unseen commander. The way they stared at Camilla wasn’t with a look full of curiosity, yet it wasn’t a glare of naked hostility either. They simply observed her with that very same sense of indifference.

She felt a chill.

– It really is strange...!

“If you really are the awful person like in the rumours, then you should have no issues with having me *disposed of*. That way, I wouldn’t be able to oppose you going on your consolation visit, after all. Please feel free to shake hands with the townsfolk, whilst yours are covered in blood.”

“You...!”

The conversation had suddenly gone to a disturbing place. If anything, it had become dangerous and it was moving faster than she could keep up.

But, Camilla knew that even if she denounced this old woman, it would be utterly meaningless.

If Martha was gone, someone else would just take her place. The servants in this mansion... Rather, perhaps all the people in this town were like trained soldiers. They didn’t know fear and would stand in her way on command.

It was an eerie and uncomfortable thought. Yet even if it sickened her, she couldn’t think of a way to win in this situation. No matter what Camilla did, even if she had shouted or threatened this woman as much as she could, even if she for some reason had this woman’s head taken off... It wouldn’t change a thing.

The words that came from Martha’s lips wouldn’t disappear even if she died, that intrinsic threat against Camilla.

“...I shall be returning to my room.”

Camilla gripped her hands into fists and chewed her lip in resentment as she quietly said that.

“I deeply appreciate your understanding.”

Martha spoke emotionlessly as she nodded her head. The men on her left and right didn’t change their facial expression at all.

“I will show you back to your room.”

One of the maids who had been watching the affair unfold emerged from the shadows to lead Camilla.

Camilla felt a deep sense of aggravation as she followed along behind her.

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Just who on earth is that old woman?

Just where did she get that attitude from?

How can she be so utterly rude?

Even when she complained like that to the maid that had served to guide her back to the room, the only answer she got back was ‘I don’t know’.

This girl too reminded Camilla of a doll. With that expressionless mask and chestnut brown hair. Her cheeks were so white she could have sworn they were made of porcelain. She gave off the same impression as those two manservants from earlier. She even had that beauty spot under her eye. Perhaps she was the sister of one of them?

After guiding Camilla back to that room, that expressionless maid turned on her heel without a word and left.

○

“Ahh, how frustrating...!!”

“JEEZ! JEEEEZ! SO FRUSTRATING!!”

They were back in the guest room. Once that joyless maid left the room, Camilla and Nicole both shouted out loud.

“What sort of leap in logic was that!? Why was she so obsessed with death!? What year does she think this is!?”

“How can she show such an attitude!? Doesn’t she know that she was speaking to the Mistress of the Montchat house!?”

“Nicole, you could use a little self-awareness as well!?”

When Nicole said that word absent mindedly again, Camilla turned to glare at her. But, Nicole was so lost in her own anger that she didn’t seem to notice.

“That’s just the kind of people the Meyerheims are! They won’t feel satisfied until they’ve died for something!!”

The Meyerheim lineage had a long tradition of martial spirit. If you add that culture to the harsh environment of Mohnton, it was easy to see how such a terribly outdated worldview could be fostered. With their uniform streets, their passionless way of living and even those expressionless faces, it was as if they were all living under some strange kind of military leadership.

Moving as one, all following the same purpose, it was as if they had thrown away all personal feelings. If you cut off one head, another would rise in its place. There would be a replacement for that expressionless maid just like there would be one for that wizened old woman.

– No.

Camilla denied the thoughts that had begun to worm her way into her chest. It wasn't quite like that. That woman had acted with some measure of malice against Camilla. There were definitely some feelings attached to her words. For whatever reasons, she was angry with Camilla, and those feelings became obvious through her words.

"Mistress, is this the kind of treatment that you get all the time!?"

Her train of thought was once again derailed by Nicole's indignation. Camilla shook her head fervently.

"It has never been anything like this! This town really is all too strange!"

Even in Grenze, she was never confronted directly in such a way. She did have that one terrible experience back in the territory's capital, but she was able to eventually get rid of the chief troublemakers. At most, the only really problematic person there was Gerda.

"Is the whole town conspiring to harass me now!? I won't forgive something like this! I will absolutely make them regret it!!"

That said, Einst was one of the most important cities in Mohnton. Even if she had the people who were rude to her face punished, that would only earn her the ire of the townsfolk. Not to mention if the people in town acted as uniformly as the servants in the mansion, it wouldn't be feasible to punish them all.

Changing the mindset of a town that had been mired in its ways for hundreds of years wouldn't be simple either. Just what on earth could she do to change how they viewed her?

Bringing one or two people over to her side wouldn't be enough. She would have to do something much more loud and showy.

– Such a thing, I can absolutely do it!

"I shall definitely have them all bow down low and call me 'Lady Camilla' before the end...!"

"That's right!! We'll definitely show them good! Ahh...!"

The moment that Nicole clapped her hands together as she said that, the vase beside her blew into smithereens.

"Hey...!"

"Yes! I am deeply sorry!!"

Nicole's magical powers were more unstable than ever that day.

○

Nicole gloomily swept up the remains of the vase alone.

After all the excitement earlier, there was a sense of emptiness now.

"You don't hold back when you get angry, do you?"

Perhaps due to that sudden shock, Camilla managed to regain her composure as she looked at Nicole.

Not too long ago, Nicole was a person who kept her emotions welled up inside of her, even when she was being directly tormented. Keeping her feelings to herself, she would always meekly lower her head when she was being scolded and never made any excuses. Camilla initially thought she had been quite an introverted person.

So, Camilla was quite surprised by how quick she was to anger.

“...I showed you something shameful.”

Nicole lowered her head in embarrassment. After releasing a burst of magical energy as a result of her magical power, it seemed like she had returned to the usual Nicole.

“I don’t mean to scold you for it. After something like that, it’s only natural to be angry.”

That person almost seemed to be trying to make her angry, after all. It would have taken someone with the patience of a sage to not lose their cool in such a situation.

– Lord Alois is having to deal with all sorts of people just like this.

She had only gotten into an argument with a single advisor. Having to deal with multiple people like that, she felt exhausted just imagining it. If Camilla didn’t have time to let her passions cool, she would probably pop a blood vessel in anger after the third person.

She could understand someone breaking under the strain of something like that. Camilla, of course, had no inclination of ever being broken down in such a way, if anything she was the one who wanted to break her opponents, but she knew that not everyone felt the same way.

Perhaps Alois’ will wouldn’t be as durable as Camilla’s? Especially if he didn’t have someone there he could rely on, as she did now.

As she sighed, cold air blew through the window. Frowning at the sudden stiff breeze thick with miasma, Nicole raised her head.

“Should I close the windows? The wind is getting stronger.”

“Just this much should be fine.”

“But, it feels like the miasma is getting stronger, so I’m worried about your skin, Mistress...”

Nicole’s words trailed off into silence. Before Camilla could ask her what was wrong, an even stronger wind blew into the room.

Her skin felt like it was burning in that sudden gust of air.

“...Mistress, something’s wrong. The miasma is...”

She didn’t hear whatever it was Nicole was about to say.

The deafening sound of an explosion drowned out Nicole’s words.

That deep and rumbling sound caused the buildings in the town to tremble with its power alone.

The ground shook. The mansion quaked.

Camilla felt the floor beneath her shift. Unable to keep her footing, Camilla fell down on her rear as she looked towards the window.

It was as if the miasma had taken form, a dark and dense haze like an overflowing river swallowed up the town.

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Alois said that if something happened, run into the forest.

The reason was because of the foundations of this town.

Since the city of Einst was built atop a reclaimed swamp, it was surrounded by swamps that had either been used for mining in the past or were currently being excavated.

What's more, the reclaimed land itself was originally a swamp that was mined for manastone. Once the mining in the area had dried up, that's when the town of Einst was built.

Therefore, deep below the surface of this town, a manastone vein still flowed. It was said to have withered due to the mining, apparently almost to the point of disappearing, but it was still a vein that was connected to others. Furthermore, what flowed into it was the very active veins still currently being mined in the swamps nearby.

On the other hand, the forest itself was outside the town limits of Einst. Those woods were populated by trees similar to the ones seen back in the territory's capital, broad-leaved with few animals and insects seen scurrying around in their shades.

Compared to the marshes that surrounded Einst, the forest was unique.

It was the only place outside of town where the ground was dry.

The dirt had become compact and solidified, forming around the deep roots of the trees. There weren't any poisonous herbs or plants growing there, whilst the fact that the trees were thick with leaves and there were some normal animals making their homes there proved that it wasn't polluted with miasma like the swamps.

Between the regular wetlands and the miasma filled swamps and bogs, it was hard to tell just where one ended and the other began. Rather than escaping into the wetlands and potentially running into a poisonous swamp, it would be far less dangerous to escape instead into the forest.

The people in Einst should have known that as well.

Alois himself certainly would have issued those same instructions he told Camilla to everyone else, should there be the need to evacuate.

○

The booming noises came one after another. The first one was earth shaking, but gradually they became quieter and quieter.

Was the danger passing? Yet every time the ground shook, the miasma seemed to become denser.

On the streets of the town outside, people ran out of their homes in panic. The shouts of confused and bewildered townsfolk began to sound in the streets.

“The manastones exploded! It sounded really close!! Everyone, run!!”

The voice was swallowed up by the sound of another explosion echoing through the town.

“The explosion is underground!! There’ll be a collapse!!”

As if that explosion had broken the dam, shouts of fear and confusion poured forth.

Camilla who burst out the front door of the mansion saw women and children fleeing down the street, the earth still shaking under their feet.

That neatly paved avenue, the road that was split precisely for two lanes of carriage and foot traffic, the uniform houses that stood neatly in a row. Yet, the terrified throngs of people, looking for any escape as they ran down that street, destroyed that orderly image.

As the town was filled with cries and the constant tremors from the depths of the earth, Camilla could hardly hear herself think. The miasma filled the air like a thick and discoloured smog, so she could barely make out the faces of people standing right in front of her.

A middle-aged woman shouted in the street in an attempt to find her children. The elderly, without firm feet of their own or a shoulder to lean on, lagged behind the main group of fleeing townspeople. Someone fell and was trampled underfoot, another child was lost in the fog, cries echoed from all around her.

All she could see through the smog were older commoners and children. She couldn’t spot any group of men who would have been useful for getting people to safety at all. She didn’t have time to think about why that was, as the quaking earth nearly threw her off balance again.

“Stay out of the houses! Head to the town square! Make for open ground!!”

One of the manservants who had blocked Camilla’s path earlier raised his voice from somewhere nearby. Just as Camilla ran out the front door of the mansion, all the servants of the house were beginning to escape as well.

Martha also came down the front stairs, hobbling on her cane. The second of the man servants took her arm to support her as she made her way out of the estate.

They all seemed to be heading for a specific place. The center of town, just off the main street, a place where the largest thoroughfare in town intersected with numerous others, forming a major intersection like a spider’s web.

– The town square,,,?

Those individual flows of terrified people seemed to merge into one uniform stream. Despite the screams of panic, they all headed in a single direction.

“Lady Camilla! We have to escape as well!”

Nicole tugged on Camilla’s sleeve, urging her to join the flow of people. But, Camilla hesitated for just a moment. Should she really go?

– The town square... Isn’t that right in the middle of town?

“...Lord Alois said to escape to the forest.”

Standing still in front of the mansion, Camilla muttered to herself. From behind her, as if to drown out her voice, someone yelled.

“...Out of the way!!”

One of the maids from the manor ran past her, knocking Camilla aside. That maid with a strong looking gaze and chestnut brown hair was about to enter into the flow of people.

“Wait just a moment!”

Camilla found herself reaching out and catching her arm. The maid looked surprised at being stopped like that, but was doubly surprised when she turned around and saw that it was Camilla who had done it. After blinking in confusion, she looked at Camilla with a mixture of fretful impatience and confusion.

“What is it? Please release me. Don’t the both of you want to escape as well?”

“If you want to escape, why not escape into the forest? Is that not what Lord Alois said to do as well?”

“The forest!?”

The maid shouted like she couldn’t believe her ears.

“What if the trees fall over!? We’ll be crushed!”

“But, in the first place, isn’t there a manastone vein running underneath the town!? Even if there’s nothing to collapse on you in the town square, the ground itself will fall through!!”

“The ground will not collapse!”

The maid raised her voice again, throwing off Camilla’s hand. It was if she knew for a fact since she said it with such conviction.

In the first place, she didn’t have time to listen to Camilla in an emergency like this. The sound of explosions could still be heard and the miasma rolling through the streets was only getting thicker by the second. They had to escape as soon as possible.

“This town has been around for over a hundred years and the ground has never collapsed like that! I know much more about this town than you know about the capital!”

“Wait! Just wait one moment!!”

Camilla grabbed at the arm of the maid who turned to escape again. Then, raising her voice, she shouted not just so that the maid could hear her, but everyone else nearby.

“Stop at once! You are evacuating to the wrong place!”

“What... Stop saying ridiculous things!”

Only the maid whose arm Camilla held was able to respond to her shout. The fleeing townspeople didn’t spare Camilla a glance as the panicked throng kept moving towards the square. Still, Camilla couldn’t give up. Taking a deep breath, she yelled from the depths of her stomach.

“Turn around and escape to the forest!! I command you!! Stop at once!!”

“Get your hands off me! Stop talking nonsense!! Isn’t it only common sense to escape to somewhere wide open!? This is what we have always done!!”

The maid in front of her snapped. She yanked on her arm and twisted her body to try and escape. Did she lose her footing because of the struggling maid or was it because the ground shook beneath her feet? Camilla couldn’t have known.

“...Mistress.”

Standing beside Camilla and the maid from Einst, who were all tangled up on the ground, Nicole spoke timidly. The girl’s eyes seemed somehow distant. Then, as if she were looking at something no one else could see, her breathy voice came out through trembling lips.

“Mistress, this is bad. It’s getting closer...”

The quaking didn’t stop at all. Beneath their feet, there was the sound of a deep rumbling. The young maid could feel the presence of an incredibly vast amount of magical energy growing ever closer.

Her vision blurred. As if choking on the miasma, Nicole doubled over with coughs.

But, her words were drowned out by the tussle between the two girls on the ground below her.

“Do you even have a reason to run for the square!? If you value your life, you should escape into the forest! Your traditions aren’t going to protect anyone!!”

“What would an outsider like you know!? If you want to get yourself killed, don’t drag me into it!!”

“I’m telling you because I don’t want to see anyone getting killed!!”

As Camilla cried out, the rumbling died down for just an instant, leaving the streets eerily quiet.

The earthquakes, the disquieting sounds from deep beneath the earth, even the sound of far off explosions. All of it ceased.

The sudden silence left the people dumbfounded. Some wondered if time itself had somehow come to a standstill.

All they could do was stand there, blinking in silent confusion as they looked around.

But in the next moment, everything ended.

A deafening roar far louder than anything before peeled through the town. This time, though, the ground beneath their feet didn’t quake.

Instead, it completely collapsed. Cracks emerged all over the street, swallowing the townspeople down into the earth.

The last thing Camilla remembered was the desperate screams all around her and the odd sensation of falling through the air.

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She could feel her fingertips submerged in cold water.

Had she landed on her back? A dull pain ached through her spine. Even when she opened up her eyes a crack, her surroundings were so dark it was as if they were still closed. But, she could still feel the dense miasma on her skin.

Camilla lay still, blinking in the darkness. Then, suddenly, she jerked herself upright vigorously.

– Just where am I...!?

Her feet were cold and numb. The back of her dress felt wet now that she had raised herself up as well. Actually, she could feel that her entire body was soaked through. But, it wasn't actually water. What she had fallen into was something closer to a swamp... And it hurt merely to touch it. It was like a marsh filled with liquified miasma.

Miasma was usually released as a sort of gas, travelling on the air. But when the miasma has reached a very high level of density, it liquifies instead. When this liquification solidifies into pure magical power, that's how a manastone is created.

In other words, this was a manastone vein, a place from which both miasma and manastones sprang forth into life.

– It wasn't a complete lie to say that it had withered somewhat.

Even if the manastones had dried up, this place was still rich with miasma. If it was left alone for another length of time, the miasma would become even more dense and begin to naturally form manastones again. If manastones began to be formed here once more, that would also be accompanied by violent natural reactions.

– So I was right, after all.

She wasn't wrong when she said that everyone should have escaped into the forest. As she thought that, Camilla felt a sense of self-satisfaction. On that note, what had happened to the others? There had been so many people on that street.

“Nicole! Anyone!? Is anyone there!?”

Crawling through the miasma that nipped at her skin painfully, Camilla cried out into the dark. Instead of hearing anyone calling back out to her, the only thing she could hear was another rumbling in the distance. The explosions from the manastone vein must not have stopped yet.

It was so dark that she could barely make out her hands in front of her. Camilla scrabbled around in that abyss, sweeping her arms out in front of her as if reaching for something.

“Nicole!?”

As her finger tips touched something soft, Camilla raised her voice. It felt like she touched a person. As she kept touching it, she felt a quiet moan from underneath her fingers. Was she touching someone's

face? She gave what she assumed was the person's cheek a slight smack to try and wake them up, but when whoever it was beneath her woke up she slapped that hand away.

"Stop that... Where is this...?"

Camilla frowned when she heard that voice. She had heard it before, but the person in front of her spoke with a sharper tone than Nicole did. Her voice was quite low for a woman's as well.

"Who's there?"

"That was what I wanted to ask you."

Naturally.

○

Camilla had fallen deep underground when the ground had collapsed. There were pools of liquified miasma all over the place, as well as what seemed like tunnels leading out from the cavern they found themselves in.

She couldn't see where they had fallen from. Since they had fallen from the surface, she thought that she would at least be able to see some trace of light, but there was no hint of the sky above. Either they fell much deeper than she imagined or the miasma overhead was so thick that it blotted out the town above.

Around her were people who had fallen through the earth in the exact same way. Although some had light injuries, there was no one who had been killed or even injured so badly they couldn't move.

That had to be due to the dense pools of miasma. Even if they didn't seem particularly deep, they must have mitigated the impact of the fall quite a bit.

Since there were quite a few people still collapsed on the ground, Camilla and the woman she had woken up split up to help others. Nicole had also been caught up in the collapse. When Nicole had woken up in a pool of miasma, she had panicked and her magical energies ran wild, but she managed to calm down after a while. Terrified that she would lose control again, she was sitting quietly in a corner of the cavern, hugging her knees.

On the other hand, this other girl wasn't being quiet at all.

"If you had just let go of my hand, this wouldn't have happened!"

The maid who had tried to escape to the square was still blaming Camilla. In fact, she was the girl that Camilla had woken up before. They'd held off whilst they were helping everyone else that had fallen, but now that everyone had been accounted for, that obligation was gone.

Truth be told, what the girl said wasn't entirely wrong.

"Because you wouldn't let me go, I couldn't escape! It's because of you that I'm stuck in a place like this!"

As she screamed angrily, there was another echoing explosion. The sensation of the sounds growing ever closer filled the maid with a sense of dread as she yelped.

The people around the two of them were also looking more and more frightened. If the explosions continued like this, what would become of them? Especially because of how strong the miasma was around them.

“How are you going to take responsibility for this!? At this rate, we’ll all be buried alive!!”

Spreading her hands out, she indicated the panicking townsfolk all around her. Camilla looked at the faces of the people who had fallen underground.

Her eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, so she could see the vague outlines of the townspeople around her. Most of them were women, children or the elderly. There were both towns people and some of the maids that worked at the manor. Not to mention Martha and her two manservants.

“...We have no choice but to wait for a rescue party from the surface.”

One of the servants said that with an almost hopeless voice.

“We wouldn’t be able to break any manastones to release their magical power either. As you can see, these veins have withered, there aren’t any manastones anywhere.”

It was a classic way of signaling distress that miners had used in the past. By releasing a large amount of magical energy, a magic user on the surface could pinpoint their position. Usually, miners would cause this by breaking open a manastone.

Another way, of course, was through a person’s own magical energy. Although if they didn’t have enough magical power to alert someone all the way on the surface, it would be meaningless.

The servant looked around at everyone as he continued.

“Someone with enough magical power that someone on the surface could sense it, is there anyone like that here?”

“Of course not.”

A middle-aged townswoman responded straight away. Even in the darkness, you could tell that the small outlines by her side were crying children.

“Everyone with strong magical power is working up at the mines. There wouldn’t be anyone with strength like that idling about during the day. It’s the same for all the menfolk, too.”

The woman spoke as if that was only natural. But, there was something strange about that.

“But, Lord Alois told me that he called for a stop to the mining operations?”

As the miasma became stronger and stronger, Alois said that he had called for an immediate halt at the mines in both Grenze and Einst as a safety precaution.

There was something she hadn’t realized yet though, and Camilla could only frown when she finally did think of it.

Grenze and Einst, both cities that owed their prosperity to mining. If one town stopped production, it presented an opportunity for the other to get a leg-up on the competition. So, that's what Einst had done.

"This town relies on mining. How could we possibly just stop?"

It was Martha, crouched down low in the dark, who answered her quietly. A disaster like this must have taken its toll on her old bones and she looked exhausted.

"Unlike Grenze, mining is all this town has. Asking us to stop is the same as asking us to stop living. Just how long were we expected to stop? The miasma has always been thick around these parts. Yet, he wanted us to stop until the miasma had completely cleared away?"

"Lord Alois ordered you to stop because the miasma was out of the ordinary!"

"How could someone who spends all his life in the capital know what is or isn't out of the ordinary here? We are the ones who live in this town. So, we are the ones who know better."

"How can you say you know better in such a sorry state like this!?"

"Say whatever you please. We have always lived in this town. So if we were wrong, then we shall just die."

With that, Martha turned her gaze away from Camilla. As if to say that was her last word on the matter.

– She's lived a long time... So she thinks she can just say whatever she likes!? In fact, wasn't Lord Alois absolutely right from the start!?

However, whoever was in the right or the wrong didn't matter. An outsider's words were meaningless, only history and tradition held value here.

– Utterly stupid!

Whether the main driving factor was their dislike of Alois or their rivalry with Grenze, the fact remained that they had put themselves in extraordinary danger. Every time the explosions rumbled they sounded ever closer, matched by the ever louder cries of children and nervous whispers. Beside her, she heard someone whisper 'I don't want to die'.

Although she tried to keep that strong voice of hers taught, fear had begun to quiver the speech of the maid who had fought with Camilla earlier. Perhaps, even Martha was the same. Was she crouching down low to hide her face, so that others wouldn't see the fear?

– So they do have feelings, after all.

Even if they acted like toy soldiers, even if their faces were like porcelain masks, they still desperately wanted to cling to life in a situation like this. They wanted to be saved. They were still people full of feelings and life.

But, not one of them could move. It was as if they were all entangled in their upbringing, waiting for someone to take charge and give them a command.

As Camilla curled her hands into fists, she heard yet another rumbling explosion.

It sounded ever closer. The walls shook, with some of the rock coming loose. Before the sound of the crumbling rocks had even ended, she heard another explosion, even closer still.

“...Mistress, I think... We have to go.”

Nicole, who was sitting by herself in the corner when she last checked on her, quietly whispered in Camilla’s ear. She was as frightened as anyone.

“It’s not just the miasma, it’s the magical energy itself... I can feel it getting closer. This place isn’t safe.”

“...Nicole, you understand things like that, right?”

As Camilla asked her that, Nicole nodded without much conviction.

With strong magical powers such as hers, she was sensitive to fluctuations of the miasma in the air. She could also feel things that Camilla and others without much magical power couldn’t feel or comprehend.

“All right, then.”

Camilla gave her a quick answer, and then inhaled as much air as she could into her slender body.

Without someone giving any orders, it was as if these people couldn’t move at all. Martha, who would usually play that role, seems resigned to death.

Since that’s the case, there was only one solution.

It was Camilla’s time to shine.

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“You want us to leave here!?”

The maid raised her trembling voice.

“And go where, exactly!? How do you expect us to move in the dark when we have injured and elderly people here!?”

“The important part is not where we are going. We have to escape from here because it isn’t safe. Although I definitely recall saying something like that earlier!”

The shaking was almost constantly now. Every time another explosion echoed in the distance, Nicole trembled. That low rumbling had gradually turned into a higher pitched whine. The walls around them creaked as if something was pressing hard against them on the other side.

“It’s not as if we can be sure anywhere else is safe either!”

But, even still, the people didn’t trust Camilla. Leaving this cavern meant having to go into one of those tunnels. Even if their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, the thought of squeezing through those narrow crevices was too much to bear. There were old folks, not to mention children. Some people were still sporting injuries. It would be an exceptionally hard road for them especially.

Most of all, it’s just as that maid said. There was no guarantee that they would survive if they took one of those tunnels, nor could she guarantee they would be able to return back to the cavern if it turned out to be the wrong choice. It could lead to a dead end. Or, before they escaped, they could be caught up in an explosion of magic.

In that case, it would be better to stay in a place like this, where at least they could feel secure in its size. Her line of thinking made sense.

“I agree, it would be better for us to stay here.”

One of the manservants agreed with the maid.

“This is where we first fell. So, there should be a connection to the part of the surface that collapsed. If we move thoughtlessly, it might frustrate the efforts of the people looking to rescue us.”

The servant’s words were both sober and persuasive. What’s more, he was one of the few men amongst them. People found themselves leaning towards trusting him unconsciously.

“For the miners, it’s an important rule to never move from the place you were initially trapped. Even if there aren’t any manastones to break, that doesn’t mean there’s no way for anyone with magical power to find you from the surface. If there was a cave in or collapse because of a manstone explosion, a magic user can follow the clues to find you. By waiting where you are, help will definitely come. That is how we have always done things.”

‘That’s right’, she heard people whisper from around her. Camilla shouted to drown out those sounds.

“There is no point in waiting here just to be buried alive!!”

The walls quaked, shaking loose debris. Falling rocks fell into the pools of miasma with loud splashes. The miasma was getting thicker in the air, to the point where Camilla couldn't tell the difference between it and the regular darkness anymore. Standing next to her, Nicole shook, her eyes closed.

“The person with magical power herself said that it was dangerous here! If just wait for help to come, all our rescuers will find are our corpses!”

“How can you say things like that in front of the children!?”



With an angry shout, a sound rang through the darkness. The maid had slapped Camilla hard across the cheek. As she felt the warm pain spreading across her face, Camilla heard a child crying at the same time. One of the townswomen tried to soothe them with a hug. Those reverberating wails only seemed to add to the fatigue of everyone there.

Still, Camilla couldn't keep quiet. She could still hear the explosions. The walls were creaking even more violently than before. There was no way that the people didn't realize that it was getting closer and closer.

"If we stay here like this, then that child won't be able to cry anymore either!"

"And if we follow you, it will be the same! If you want to go, then go by yourself!"

The ground shook as the maid shouted. Even in the darkness, it was obvious just how frightened she was by her expression. A crashing sound somewhere nearby ended their argument, as something heavy collapsed in one of the tunnels.

When the sound faded, there was a momentary silence. Even the child's wailing had died away. The only thing they could hear was each other's breathing. Somehow, that helped cool everyone's heads.

Camilla took a deep breath, then let it out quietly.

"I do not want to die in a place like this."

"...Obviously. I especially don't want to die together with you, either."

"I agree completely. That is why it would be better for us to leave here."

"Even if people follow you, someone might get killed. What will you do if someone dies?"

She met the gaze of that sharp-eyed maid. So, this was the truth of it. They all knew that this place was dangerous. But, they still hesitated, because moving forward didn't guarantee any safety either.

Would it really be okay? What if the road that lay ahead is even more terrible? Can we really believe in and follow her?

Right now, Camilla didn't have any means of getting them to trust her. She couldn't even guarantee that they would survive. They didn't want to regret the choice to follow her into death.

"If you die, I will take on your grudge."

So, she would simply have to accept those regrets on herself.

"I cannot ensure that everyone here will make it back alive. If someone dies, however, I shall take responsibility. I do not mind if you hate me for it, either. If you have any complaints, feel free to vent them to me as we go!"

Camilla said that as she looked around at the people in the dark. The maids, the manservants, the people of the town and even Martha. All of them looked back at Camilla as well.

"I will take responsibility for everything! In return, if we manage to make it back, make sure you appreciate it!"

Of course, she would want a grand show of it. Something like having them all bow down low before Camilla and apologize for their rudeness up until then.

As Camilla's words echoed off the walls of the cavern, the people looked at one another. They didn't say a word, simply looking in silence as another roar echoed from an explosion nearby.

Once that quaking ceased, the maid who had argued with her the whole time finally gave in.

"...I still think you're a fool."

"What did you say?"

– She still wants to pick a fight?

Camilla snarled at her, but the maid didn't seem to care. Looking at the floor, she spoke thoughtfully.

"If you wanted to live, you should have escaped by yourself before. That way, you wouldn't have had to take on responsibility for anyone's lives, or their regrets... But, well, you don't seem like the kind of person who would die so easily, either."

The maid massaged her temples. It seemed like she was at a loss for words as she sighed.

"...If I die, I'll haunt you forever."

As the maid looked at her, Camilla smiled.

– Very well, I'll accept that.

○

With Nicole leading them on, Camilla and the rest of the people entered one of the tunnels with the least amount of miasma flowing through it.

The elderly and the injured were supported by the servants, whilst the townswomen lead the children by the hand. Camilla had been the last one to enter the tunnel, and as she did she heard the largest explosion so far.

Turning around to look, she saw a bright light on the far side of the cavern.

It took her a moment to realize that was pure magical energy.

Looking back, she realized that the pools of miasma must have amplified the explosion. The dense miasma and the magic in the air caused a chain reaction, leading to that dazzling white light. Then, it spread between the pools of miasma one after the other. Every time a puddle ignited, the white light flared so strongly it was as if that pitch black cavern was exposed to the light of the sun.

The darkness between those flashes showed that the miasma had become even denser.

"...Time to go."

Tearing herself away from the sight, Camilla followed the rest of the people who were advancing into the tunnel.

○

They proceeded in that darkness for a while. To make sure that nobody got separated or left behind, the people constantly called out to one another.

Naturally, the tunnel wasn't like a well looked after path. The surface was slick with mud and unstable to walk on. They often had to hunch over or even crouch because of how low the ceiling of the cave was, and often times they had to squeeze through narrow crevices.

As they gradually grew more and more nervous, Nicole finally let out a voice.

“...Ah.”

Suddenly coming to a halt, Nicole looked up. They followed her gaze, but there was nothing there. At least, nothing they could see.

“Lady Camilla, above us.”

Even though she called out to her, Camilla had no idea what Nicole was pointing out. But, she felt a little relief just hearing Nicole's voice, since she had simply shivered in silence up until now.

“Someone is... Probably... Just maybe, I think there are traces of Lord Alois' magic. It's as if its trying to show us the way out.”

Nicole pointed towards the deeper part of the tunnel, her hand hovering up and to the right just a little bit.

If you go that way, you'll find your exit.

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They followed Nicole's footsteps as she illuminated the cave with a faint magical light.

Just how long had they walked? They found it hard to tell if it had been a few hours or already an entire day.

The rumbling in the deep never ceased. The concurrent sounds of explosions and collapsing rock could be heard echoing far in the distance and booming from what felt like right behind them.

As they trudged through that perilous darkness, they only became more and more anxious. Especially once they lost their sense of time and direction.

"Ah."

Nicole stopped moving, her quiet voice slipping out shakily.

"I-I'm sorry. It's a dead end..."

Nicole's light showed that the end of the tunnel they had been following connected to nowhere. All that was in front of them was a crevice far too narrow for anyone to fit through, densely packed with thick miasma.

"Well then, we'll just have to turn back, won't we? Let us return to that fork in the road."

"B-But, this place had a really strong reaction, even more than before..."

"All the more reason to go back more quickly. I would rather not get caught up in an explosive reaction in this dead-end."

As Camilla said that, the people around her sighed in exhaustion, but they didn't try to argue or complain.

Although she couldn't see everyone's faces clearly, she had a feeling that they were getting more and more apprehensive. Their plodding steps were becoming heavier and more laboured, and the voices that called out to each other in the dark were little more than whispers now.

It was no wonder, Camilla thought, as she turned around. How many times had they already been turned around like this? Just how many of them were thinking 'Are we really going to be okay?' as they constantly advance to one dead-end after another?

When it came to following the breadcrumb trail of Alois' magical energies, Nicole was clearly having trouble.

Every time she thought she had caught his trail, she ended up following the reaction of dense pools or foggy soups of miasma instead. Of course, she would make some mistakes but it seemed like it was incredibly hard for her to separate the magical reactions given off by the miasma to the magical power she was trying to follow. Whenever Nicole made a decision to go down one route or another, she never seemed confident and it felt like people were getting more and more dubious with every wrong choice she made.

Whenever Nicole stopped up against another dead-end, Camilla could hear the audible sighs of fear and frustration behind her. Even if no one said a word, she could tell what they were feeling.

Nicole, by nature, was never a person with truly strong self-conviction. She was a person afraid of the consequences of her own choices, quickly losing confidence in herself.

But, it was also true that Nicole was the only one amongst them with the power to direct them where to go. Much to her chagrin, Camilla had no choice but to leave it to her.

When they returned to where they had taken that dead end, Nicole stopped once more.

From that slightly cavernous break in the tunnels, there were several more tunnels leading off in different directions. The largest opening was the tunnel they had taken to get here in the first place. The second was covered in a dense fog of miasma and they avoided it. The third was the one that they had just gone through. However, it was a dead-end.

Other than that, there were a few crevices that only a small child would have been able to fit into. Camilla looked around, then spoke to Nicole.

“Which one? Should we try this one, then?”

Camilla asked, pointing at the second opening.

“I-I don’t think so, it has a strong reaction of magical power, but it’s dangerous...”

“Should we go back down the tunnel we came from, then?”

“You can’t! That place... It might explode at any time...”

“Then...”

As Camilla was about to speak, she heard a clanging sound behind her.

Camilla turned around to look at the source of that strange sound, lying on the floor behind her.

What she saw was Martha’s walking cane that she had thrown to the ground, with the old woman herself hunched over on the floor. The manservant beside her looked worried as he called out to her.

“Lady Martha, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t walk anymore.”

Martha looked on emotionlessly as she told him that, making no effort to pick up her fallen cane.

“My legs won’t move. I can’t even grip my walking stick properly anymore. Yet, just where am I supposed to be going?”

“We’re trying to escape, please just hang in there a little longer.”

As the manservant tried to encourage her, Martha shook her head. Then, without raising her head, she shifted her gaze to Nicole.

“We’re constantly following tunnels that the miners themselves have never taken, running into dead ends every time. At this rate, can we ever truly escape?”

It was impossible to see Martha's expression in the dark. But those words illustrated her doubts clearly. Nicole seemed to shrink back as she trembled. Her hands were grasped together as she stared at the ground.

"Um... I..."

"Nicole, are we getting closer to Lord Alois' magical power?"

"Y-Yes. I think we're close now."

Nicole managed to respond quietly to Camilla's question. Although she had been reaching one dead-end after another in pursuit of it, Nicole was in effect getting closer to the source of Alois' power. Although, even if she's close, because she doesn't know exactly how to get there she has chosen the wrong path more than a few times. That only made Nicole less and less confident each time.

Listening to Nicole's words, Martha could only express an exhausted sigh, her breath ragged.

"Can we really trust what this girl has to say? Even if you can use magic, do you really understand how to follow its power? In fact, is there really someone's power above ground in the first place? At this point, who can say."

Martha tried to take another deep breath, but it turned into a hacking cough. It must be due to her intense fatigue that her breathing sounded more and more laboured with every word she spoke. Because of her old age, this ordeal must have been truly awful on Martha. That had only enhanced her doubtfulness of the whole thing.

Of course, that didn't mean Camilla had to accept her selfish words.

"I would ask you to just remain patient, if you could. There is no point in trying to shift the blame onto Nicole now."

"Are you going to have me be patient until I keel over and die?"

"I'd have you be patient so that you don't die! If it weren't for Nicole, we would have been caught in a magical explosion already!"

"The shaking and explosions have gone on this entire time. You don't need magical power to know that nowhere in this place is safe."

In contrast to Camilla's echoing shout, Martha spoke quietly. She had never been one to raise her voice in the first place, but now it seemed she lacked the energy to do so even if she desired.

"Then why didn't you say something about moving from that cavern before Nicole did!?"

"I was being more cautious than you two."

"Ahh, you are always running your mouth! If you don't have anything helpful to say, then-!"

Camilla's loud voice was cut short by another powerful quake beneath their feet.

It was the biggest one so far. Screams and cries broke out amongst the group.

But those screams were drowned out by the roar of an explosion.

That resounding and terrifying boom dwarfed anything they had heard before.

After the echo of the explosion peeled away, they could hear the sound of a major collapse. The wind rushed out of the collapsed tunnel, buffeting Camilla and the rest with the thick miasma that travelled with it.

As if on cue, the sounds of collapsing stone walls started rushing closer and closer.

“We have to get out of here! It’s collapsing!!”

The manservant yelled. Martha took up her walking stick and the townswomen grabbed the children. But, when they turned to truly escape somewhere, they hesitated.

The collapse had come from the second tunnel. It was the place that Nicole had said not to go through just before.

– Wind?

Before that thought came to mind, Camilla was already shouting.

“Quickly! Run this way!”

There was no time to think about it. The people began to run as fast as their tired bodies could carry them. The chain reaction of explosions was growing closer and closer.

○

The place where they emerged was a large cavern. It was similar to where Camilla and the others had originally fallen. The air was thick with choking miasma and the ground was covered with familiar pools of the stuff as well.

They could still hear the explosions and deep rumblings behind them. The cavern creaked and shook with each one, the walls looking as if they were shifting with those worrying sounds.

“Irma!!”

As Camilla’s group reached the center of the cavern completely out of breath, they heard a voice shout out from nearby.

A person’s voice. Looking up in surprise, Camilla saw multiple people in that cavern who weren’t in that group, illuminated by the flickering light of Nicole’s magic.

It wasn’t a large group in that small cavern, perhaps only fourteen or fifteen people. They sat side by side, huddled together against the walls. Some of them were lying down. The walls around them showed signs of recent collapse.

“Frida!? Didn’t you escape to the town square!?”

The sharp-eyed maid with the chestnut brown hair yelled out in shock after a sharp intake of breath. By her side, Martha crouched down low to the floor out of sheer exhaustion. She didn’t seem to have the energy or the conviction to grasp her fallen cane again as she sat there in silence.

“The town square collapsed! But you too, why are you here!?”

“Collapsed...!?”

The maid called Irma stood looked bewildered as she stood in stunned silence.

As for the people around her, they came to a stop as well. But, the dense miasma filled winds that had been expelled from the collapsed tunnels didn't stop on their account. The chain reaction of explosions finally caught up to Camilla's group, collapsing the tunnel they had just fled through.

In the glaring light of the nearby explosion, the people panicked. There wasn't any time to catch up like this.

“We have to keep going! This place will collapse as well!”

“And where are we going to go?”

Someone responded to Camilla's yell. There were an uncountable number of small tunnels leading out of the cavern that Camilla's group now found themselves in. Camilla had no idea which of them were dead ends and which were ways out. Only one person amongst them could truly have any idea.

“Nicole! Which way!?”

“Um, I... Uh...!”

Nicole clasped her hands together tightly as she looked around at the seemingly endless tunnels, looking as if she were about to burst into tears. Her eyes darted from here to there, panicked and unfocused. It was like she was at a complete loss.

At the same time, the sounds didn't die down at all. The earth rumbled and quaked, the air becoming thicker and thicker with miasma being blown from the collapsed tunnels by the second.

“Umm... I... Uh, this way, no, wait, this way...?”

Nicole mumbled as she looked this way and that. Camilla grew impatient as Nicole seemed terrified with the idea of making a decision at all. The cavern shook and people's screams grew louder. Apart from those who were still laying down on the floor, the people sitting against the wall backed away towards the center of the cavern, petrified that the walls were about to cave in at any second.

“Nicole! Quickly!”

“Um, umm!”

Nicole quivered as everyone looked to her. All their expectations, as well as all their doubts. With only a single word out of her mouth, Nicole would hold all their lives in the balance.

The weight of that responsibility was too much on her small shoulders.

“Nicole!”

As she withered under the pressure, another explosion rocked the cavern. The biggest pool of miasma at the edge of the cave reacted, emitting a brilliant white light. One of the walls collapsed on top of one of the people who still lay down. The terrified screams reverberated ever louder. Yet, without knowing where to run to, they stood stone still as if they had been stuck to the floor.

Just where could they run to in this darkness? Which path could lead them to safety? What if where they fled to was somehow even more dangerous?

“You have to decide! Nicole! You are the only one who can!!”

“B-But, Mistress, w-what if I’m wrong?”

“If that happens, then I will take responsibility!”

If anyone died, Camilla alone would take on their grudges. That was what she had said when they first set out. Even if Nicole ended up making the wrong choice, it was Camilla who had taken over leadership. That’s why all Nicole had to do was decide. If her decision led to regret and resentment, then Camilla would shoulder that burden herself.

– Besides...

“Don’t worry, Lord Alois is up there. We can believe in him.”

Besides, Camilla had absolutely no intention of dying in such a miserable place. In order to return home alive, she had to trust Nicole’s judgement.

“T-That’s right... Lord Alois is...!”

“Not just Lord Alois, either.”

Even amongst the sounds of falling debris running through the cavern, Camilla’s voice sounded through as clear as day as she looked at Nicole.

“You too, Nicole. I believe in your power as well.”

Nicole’s breath caught in her throat as she looked at Camilla with wide eyes.

The ground swayed and another light lit up the room, with more terrified yells resounding. The walls shook ominously as people finally decided enough was enough and began running. They couldn’t stay here, even if that meant taking their chances with the caves.

“Lead on, Nicole! Just where are we going!? Have you made up your mind!?”

“...Yes!”

Swallowing her shaky breaths, Nicole yelled out as loud as she could, then ran in front of the people who had already begun to flee, leading the others on.

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The cavern began to collapse entirely.

Following Nicole, people began to flee as they screamed. Miasma exploded into light, the walls collapsed, the ground beneath their feet ruptured.

“If you are able, carry the injured to safety! Keep an eye on the children! Lend a hand to the elderly!”

Through the chaos, Camilla shouted out orders. Helping one another, even the injured and the children were able to make their way out of the cavern.

“Has everyone escaped!?”

Once everyone had passed her by, Camilla breathlessly looked back at the cavern as she yelled. Anyone who hadn’t made it already probably wasn’t going to make it at all. There was no one back there still moving... No, there was.

“Wait, please wait! Someone, help!”

Squirming in the shadow of a recent collapse, someone moved. Beside them, another person stood, crying out for help.

As another explosion lit up the cavern, she could see who they were in the flash of light.

It was that girl, Irma... As well as that other girl with brown hair and skin like a porcelain mask. A maid with a beauty spot under her eye.

“Frida was caught under the rocks! Please don’t leave her here! Help!!”

○

Frida’s foot had been completely pinned under falling debris from her ankle down.

Trying to escape together, Irma had taken Frida’s hand to run. Frida had never been a fast runner, so Irma stayed alongside her to try and make sure she got to safety.

But, as the two were running, an explosion flared up right next to them. It wasn’t a massive explosion, but it was enough to knock rocks loose from the ceiling.

Irma had been right in front of that sudden reaction of magical energy. Shocked by that sudden explosion, Irma had come to a stunned stop. It was then that Frida had seen it. Purely on instinct, she had pushed Irma out of the way.

Irma fell, and by the time she had gotten back up, she could already see Frida pinned under the debris.

“Frida!”

Irma rushed over to her in a panic. The rocks that pinned her wouldn’t move no matter how much strength she pushed with. There was nothing Irma could do to help her alone.

Frida’s face twisted in agony. She couldn’t see what had happened to her foot that had been caught under the rocks, but she didn’t want to imagine it.

“Somebody, help!!”

Irma cried out in desperation as she shoved her body against the biggest of the fallen rocks. But, as everyone fled, no one stopped to help. They just got further and further away. The quaking ground and explosions rocking the cavern made it obvious that their time was running out.

“Irma, stop. Go already.”

As Frida said that, that once expressionless face was tinged with sorrow. It was hopeless. She couldn’t free herself at all. Her fate had already been sealed.

But Irma shook her head, tears in her eyes.

“No! Someone, my friend is...! Help, please!!”

She screamed at the top of her lungs until her voice went hoarse. Her voice even carried above the booming explosions. But everyone had already escaped, just why would any of them come back?

“Frida! No! Please, someone help!!”

The damp cold of the rock seeped into her palms as she threw her weight against it. Irma didn’t know what more she could do. The cavern was getting hotter by the minute due to the explosions, but her body felt nothing but a dreadful chill, as the terror ran her veins cold.

“...You laggard!”

As a voice full of resentment sounded in her ears, Irma lifted her head to look. There was a shadow of a person next to her, throwing their weight against the rock as well. Those thin hands of hers were planted on it, trying to move it in the exact same way she had. Those hands... Those pale and gentle hands that had never known such heavy labour before.

Irma blinked as she stood stupefied, wondering if she was hallucinating.

“What are you doing!? Stop gawking at me like a fool!!”

“...Y-You... Why... Why would you...?”

“What do you mean, weren’t you yelling out for help!?”

The owner of those slender arms didn’t even look at Irma. All she did was press her hands against the rock and push with all the strength she could muster.

“But... You... Why would you ever help me?”

“What, you’d rather I just leave you two to die then!?”

“Stop being ridiculous!”, she yelled out as she pushed even harder.

“I took responsibility! So if you die, I will be the one at fault!!”

○

Even after joining forces with the maid called Irma, their combined strength wasn’t even enough to budge that boulder.

More and more, that cavern was beginning to fill with collapsed debris. If things continued like this, won't she be crushed alongside her responsibility? A rock of this size wasn't something that two girls would have been able to move in the first place.

– Jeez, we're already running out of time...

As she grew more and more anxious, a pair of hands reached out to press against the rock above Camilla's head.

"Let's put all of our strength into the next push."

"Huh...?"

It was an all too familiar voice. As the sound of another explosion peeled through the cavern, this time Camilla thought that she was seeing things.

However, that person's voice rang out before she had time to be confused.

"One, two, threeeee!!"

Camilla instinctually threw her weight against the rock on that voice's final count. Putting every ounce of strength she had left into her arms, she threw herself against it.

And that boulder, that hadn't budged an inch, moved. It rolled completely on its axis, falling into the pool of miasma next to them.

Camilla, who had thrown her full weight into that effort, couldn't stop her momentum. Completely focused on moving that rock, she didn't even think about cushioning her fall. But just before she fell, something stopped her.

Something caught Camilla's arm before she fell into the pool of miasma herself. Stepping back from the edge of that pool, Camilla only found her voice after she found her feet again.

"...Lord Alois?"

There was no one else it could be. It had been Alois who had caught Camilla before she fell, and still held her arm.

"H-How?"

– Just how was he here? And why was he alone?

To Camilla's question of only a single word, Alois replied briefly as well.

"The exit is just ahead. Everyone else has already gotten to safety."

"I-Is that true!?"

"We have to get out of here too. Can you escape on your own? I need to carry her or else she won't make it."

There was no time to celebrate. As Camilla battled to subdue the nearly overwhelming sense of relief that was about to rob her of her sense of urgency, Alois scooped up Frida in his arms. Then, he looked at Camilla one more time to make sure.

“We can’t stay here long. Are you sure there’s absolutely no one else still here!?”

“Ye-”

Just as she was about to finish saying ‘yes’, Camilla took one final look around the cavern. The people that had been laying down from the beginning still hadn’t moved and never would again. There was no one trapped under any rocks either from what she could see. There wasn’t a single sign of movement.

But, Camilla saw it.

Right in the middle of the cavern. A cane fallen to the ground. The silhouette of a small person, hunched over on the ground without moving. After everyone else fled, that old woman hadn’t said a single word at all.

“AHHHH JEEEEEEEEEEEEZ!!”

Camilla yelled out in exasperation.

○

That elderly body of hers didn’t have the strength to stand anymore. It was all she could do to keep breathing those ragged and painful breaths.

Martha was convinced that she would die here. It seemed fitting, as someone who had lived her whole life in that town. A citizen of a mining town shouldn’t really begrudge the idea of meeting their end in a mine. When Martha was a young girl, it was common for men to pass away like that. And as one of the people that ran the city, she had spoken to many bereaved families over the years who had lost loved ones in the mines. Someone would die, another would take their place, that was the way of things.

Martha was the same. If Martha died, someone would take her place. That was how things had been in this town all the way back to the beginning.

Then, she should face the end without being unsightly. Do not give in to emotions at the last moment. Never forget the pride of Einst.

That’s what she thought.

Then, why?

“At least move your feet just a little! You’re too heavy!”

“How can you say that to an old woman!? Don’t you have any compassion at all!?”

Martha felt herself walking, being supported on either side by two women. Rather, it was closer to being dragged than walking. One of them was the maid, Irma. The other was Camilla, the soon-to-be wife of that hateful Duke. In her hand, Camilla also held Martha’s cane.

“I was thinking this for a while, but you really are bull-headed, aren’t you!? You were even like this with the children before!”

“It can’t be helped! If I had to choose between being considerate and dying, then that’s an easy choice to make!”

Irma and Camilla shouted back and forth. For some reason though, although the two of them would definitely deny it, their bickering was slightly more amicable than before.

“...I don’t need your sympathy.”

Martha muttered, her voice faint. The two women dragging Martha along looked at her but didn’t stop moving.

“I’d rather just die here than be helped by an enemy.”

“Then that’s all the more reason for me to help you! I’m utterly furious with you, after all!”



Camilla yelled angrily, but she didn’t show any sign of letting go of Martha at all. Through the rocking sounds of explosions, they managed to press forward and reach the opening to the cave that lead to safety.

In front of them, they could see the back of a man who led the way, a magical light shining from his hands. Sometimes, he would turn around and shout something to encourage them. Camilla and the others followed along behind him as best they could.

“If you truly wanted to die that badly, then why did you come so far with me in the first place?”

Martha faltered as Camilla stared at her dubiously.

Back in the tunnels, Martha had trekked an utterly gruelling path just to follow Camilla, hobbling on her cane across that treacherous ground until her legs had given out. Sometimes she was supported by others, sometimes she virtually crawled in the dark, yet why?

Martha knew it well. To cling so desperately to life at her old age, it was shameful.

“...I showed an unsightly side of myself.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being unsightly in such a place. It’s a much healthier thing than to just long for death.”

Camilla said that, facing forward. That girl probably hadn’t ever carried something so heavy in her life before now. Sweat poured down her forehead. She likely hadn’t had time to think about it, but her face was covered in dirt and her dress was in tatters. Her makeup had long since become a casualty of the miasma, mud, and heat, whilst her hair was completely dishevelled. She looked ugly and dirty, a shameful figure.

– Unsightly.

“Wanting to live, that’s only natural. Everyone else is the same.”

– The unsightly one...

Martha lowered her head. She couldn’t move her legs anymore. The only reason she was still alive was because of the two girls either side of her, supporting her weight as they carried her forward. Even though she had said she didn’t want to be helped by an ‘enemy’, she didn’t resist that help either.

– The unsightly one has been me.

“Please pass me my cane.”

Martha said sharply, glancing at the walking stick in Camilla’s hands.

“I don’t need help anymore. If I have no choice but to live on, I will walk on my own two feet.”

Hearing Martha’s words, Camilla snorted derisively.

“Suit yourself. I won’t help you anymore, then. We are almost there, so do your best on your own, if you would.”

Raising her head, Martha saw a light at the edge of her vision.

It wasn’t a magical glow. It was the dazzling light of the sun.

45

The sun sat at its apex.

The dense miasma had cleared away and the sky was awash with a brilliant shade of blue.

A cool yet pleasant wind blew, wispy clouds trailed overhead, and the land was basked in light.

After Camilla crawled out of the underground and into the town square, she felt her legs give out from under her as she sat down, exhausted.

Spread out in front of her were the broken town and ruined streets of Einst. Over half of the houses she saw had collapsed in on themselves and those once orderly paved streets were peppered with cracks. In some places, it had been rent apart entirely. Although it wasn't billowing out with any real vigour, miasma still wafted from those wounds in the earth.

A lot of people were in the square and on those streets, sifting through the rubble in a desperate search for trapped survivors. Busy shouts and parties of people rushing to and fro filled the square with noise. The people that had escaped from the underground along with her were still here as well. When they saw Camilla emerge as the last person to escape that underground hell, they yelled and cheered.

"Camilla, are you okay?"

Alois rushed over to Camilla as she sat down, trying to catch her breath. He had already handed the injured Frida over to a doctor on-site. Camilla could see Frida laid up a little ways away, surrounded by people.

"I... I'm okay."

As she said that, she tried to push herself onto her feet with her hands, but she couldn't find any power in her muscles anymore. Camilla could only laugh hoarsely as Alois looked on anxiously.

"It... It's a pathetic thing to admit, but I think my waist gave out in relief."

"There's nothing pathetic about you at all."

Alois held out his hand to Camilla who couldn't stand under her own power, a warm smile on his face.

"You really showed off just how amazing and brave you are today."

As he praised her so directly like that, Camilla didn't know what to say. She felt awkward, not to mention embarrassed. Yet still, she felt a little bit happy with the compliment. But much to her chagrin, she could sense those feelings mixing with her overwhelming sense of relief and something began to well up behind her eyes.

Camilla quickly looked down, blinking away that twinkle in her eye furiously.

"What's wrong, Camilla?" Alois asked cluelessly, only making her all the more frustrated for some reason.

"Nothing whatsoever. I just felt a bout of fatigue, that is all."

Camilla said that, reaching out to grasp Alois' hand that he still held out to her.

Raising her head, she looked at Alois' own pockmarked and froggy face. Because of the strong miasma, his skin condition had gotten worse, with his puffy skin forcing his eyelids to narrow, half-hiding his red eyes.

– So frustrating.

It was frustrating, but she was left with little choice but to accept it now.

When the earthquakes had started, she had followed his words when she tried to have people on the main street evacuate to the forest.

When they were caught underground, she decided to have Nicole chase after Alois' magical power without any hesitation.

And when she saw Alois at her lowest moment, she had almost been overcome with relief.

Before she realized it, Camilla had come to trust Alois.

– ...But, he is still just a toadish man! It's far too soon to even think about being able to kiss me!

As Alois pulled Camilla to her feet, she tried to chase away those thoughts in her heart. Alois was still far from the kind of man to suit Camilla's tastes. Camilla wanted a man who was beautiful, slender yet muscular, and also someone she could rely on. Alois was still a long way away from being close to handsome in her eyes; what's more, he didn't give a whit for styling his hair or picking clothes. His arms and chest weren't muscled, just loose with useless flab.

But as she stood in front of him, Camilla noticed something strange.

Those broad shoulders rounding off his tall frame. He was still much bigger than the average man. But for some reason, she could see just a little more of the scenery behind Alois than she could before. It was as if the blue sky stretching behind him was more in view than usual.

“...Lord Alois, by any chance, have you actually lost a little weight?”

Camilla blinked in surprise as she said that, as Alois looked equally confused. He looked at Camilla with a bewildered expression in silence for a while, then sighed half in exasperation, half in relief.

“Have you really only just noticed?”

That comment too was oh so frustrating.

○

After Camilla found her feet, someone approached her, hobbling along.

As Camilla looked ahead to who it was, she saw that it was Martha, who had been at the end of the rope once she exited the underground in much the same way as Camilla had.

She was one of the town's most influential people, so it made sense that she had been well looked after. Surrounded by worried townspeople, she had been given water and had the sweat and dirt washed off her. After regaining her breath, she was supposed to be moved to someplace safer.

But pushing her helpers aside, Martha approached Camilla on her own power, wobbling on her cane as she did.

Stopping directly in front of her, she looked up at Camilla's face.

"...What?"

Confronted with that strong gaze, Camilla snarled as she glared back. Camilla was ready to argue again if she still had any complaints.

But Martha only looked at her. After staring hard into her eyes for a little while, the old woman collapsed to the ground as if she had completely run out of energy. Camilla stepped back, startled, as she tossed her cane aside and sunk to her knees.

"W-What is it-!?"

"...Lady Camilla."

"Ha?"

As Martha spoke hoarsely, Camilla could only respond with abject surprise. Camilla definitely hadn't misheard her. She heard those words clearly.

"Today, I learned about who you really are."

Martha's voice trembled as she continued to look down. The people nearby watched Martha in shock. The eyes of everyone in the plaza turned to look at the scene and Camilla who stood at the centre of it.

"You didn't just save me, but many other folks from this town. There is no reason why this town should ever turn their back on you."

These weren't the usual indifferent sounding words that came from Martha's lips. It was as if long stifled feelings were finally making their way to the surface with one deep gasp. She couldn't tell if the old woman spoke with misery or joy, but she obviously spoke with passion.

"Please forgive our horrible disrespect up until now. With what you have done, you are unmistakably our saviour."

Among the people who watched on were a number of people who had travelled the underground with Camilla. There was Irma, the manservant, and even some of the townswomen with their children. Crying. Laughing. Living. Rejoicing. Others had lost a loved one and were deep in sorrow.

In that ruined town, now in the light of day, she finally saw raw emotion shine through on the faces of the people she once saw as masks.

This town was severe and rigorous, valuing modesty and uniformity above all.

But even then, these people still had feelings. They had a huge amount of pride and passion to boot.

Camilla took a deep breath. For a moment, she couldn't find the words to say.

Of course, not everyone who looked at Camilla then had their eyes lit up with admiration, but every single person there now recognized her in some way.

The light of the sun sitting in that pristine sky bathed the town square in a warm glow. As the wind blew through the streets, Camilla hands moved to her hips.

Taking one more deep breath, Camilla puffed out her chest and smiled proudly as she shouted out, her voice ringing through the crowd like a bell.

“So be it, you are forgiven. Since I brought you back home alive, it is only appropriate that you shower me with your utmost gratitude!!”

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The true scale of the disaster was hard to stomach.

Nearly half of Einst had been virtually reduced to rubble.

Most of the houses in the southern half of town, including many on the main street, had collapsed in on themselves.

Although the damage to the northern part of the town was relatively minor, they couldn't rest easy either. There was no guarantee that there wouldn't be an aftershock or another full-scale magical reaction underground again.

The victims of the disaster, who now found themselves homeless, had erected temporary shelters on the outskirts of town.

In the meantime, the skilled magicians in the town were undertaking a thorough assessment and investigation of the manastone veins running under the town. The rebuilding process for the town could only begin if they judged that it was safe to do so.

"Sorry, I'll be busy with the assessment for some time," Alois had told her apologetically, but she didn't blame him.

Alongside Alois, Camilla too will be staying in Einst for the time being. Even if Camilla didn't have too many skills at her disposal, she was confident that she could at least help with cooking for the people who had lost their homes.

What's more, she wanted to join in the search for those people who were still missing. And for those who had lost their lives, she would offer her prayers.

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Yet, putting all that aside.

Camilla had suffered from this disaster in her own way as well.

"...This itch!"

Hugging her body, Camilla felt faint with agony.

She was now paying the price for the way in which she survived that unmitigated disaster the day before.

After crawling her way not just through the dense miasma in the air for hours in those underground tunnels, in addition to being soaked through with liquified miasma, there was no way she was going to get out of it completely unscathed.

Even though the night's sleep she got helped extensively in restoring her exhausted mind and body, the itching started the moment she woke up. She felt irritations all over her skin. Not to mention the rashes that had cropped up all over her arms and around her neck and collarbones.

As much as she tried to hide it with make-up, it was no good. Camilla's favourite cream somehow only increased how itchy she felt when she applied it. She tried to wipe the stains of the miasma off her body with a bath, but the unbearable irritations didn't subside at all. If anything, rubbing at it with the cleaning cloth only increased her agony. The feeling of wearing clothes on her skin was like a living hell.

But since she had only recently rebuked Nicole for doing it before, Camilla's pride wouldn't let her scratch at her skin. Grinding her teeth in frustration, Camilla paced back and forth restlessly.

Camilla was staying in a house on the edge of town. It was one of the buildings that had managed to survive the disaster.

The houses further towards the outskirts of town and closer to the forest had suffered less damage. Since the ground around there had been deemed relatively safe in the aftermath, there were many temporary shelters being built in the surroundings.

Whilst many people were living out of tents, she had been offered exceptional hospitality by the people of Einst and was given that house to stay in after the Montchat mansion in town had been rendered almost derelict.

But, things like that didn't matter to her at all right now. If it would do something about this itch, she wouldn't mind camping out in the woods or sleeping rough under the stars.

"I-Itchy... So itchy... Ugugugu..."

It took all her effort to suppress a scream as she moaned, her body wracked with that itch she refused to scratch. Nicole, who still slept soundly in her bed, must be happy with herself. The moment she woke up though, she was sure to suffer even worse than Camilla.

"Ahh, jeez! Enough of this! This damned itch! It hurts so much! And what about my skin!?"

Seeing the horribly red rash on her arm, Camilla spat that out in anger for no one in particular to hear.

Up until now, because she lived in the territory's capital that lay far from the true mining hubs of Mohnton, she had underestimated just what miasma could do. Even Camilla, a person with barely any magical power at all, was in a state like this. Alois' skin, meanwhile, had become even more toad-like than ever. The kind of suffering he must be going through probably made Camilla's ordeal seem like a walk in the park.

– Will he be alright?

But just as soon as that flash of worry for Alois crossed through her mind, a new wave of itching sensations washed it away. Right now, Camilla didn't have any time to worry about anyone else.

"SO ITCHYYYYY!"

Crying out aimlessly like that, Camilla suddenly heard a knock on her room's door.

Oh, what now?

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“I see you’re having a bit of a bad time?”

The two manservants who had gone through that underground ordeal with her grimaced as they stood in the doorway, their names were Theo and Leon. Theo was taller, whilst Leon had a beauty spot under his eye. Camilla remembered them, since she had committed their faces to memory with the intention of reporting them to Alois after they had prevented her from leaving before everything had happened.

“Perhaps we should come by later instead?”

“It’s fine, talking will keep my mind off it. That said, I’ll thank you to understand that I’m not exactly in the best of moods.”

Even if she said that, Camilla continued to pace around her room in silence. When she was sitting down before, she felt like she was losing her mind. Even if her clothes rubbed against her even more when she walked, she preferred to be able to move her body.

“The two of you seem to be doing fine? How hateful.”

Camilla glared angrily at those two men whom she deemed guilty.

Even if Camilla had been reduced to this state, both of those men seemed to look utterly pristine. They hadn’t moved to itch even once, and they had no signs of irritated skin. Their smooth skin looked like porcelain masks, just as they had before. They spent all that time underground together, hadn’t they? So just what was going on?

She remembered the questions she had back in Grenze. which was also a town focused around miasma infested mining operations. In contrast to all the rumours she had heard back in the capital, Alois’ condition was the exception to the norm, with most people not having such rough and irritated skin. Alois’ skin problems were exacerbated as a rare case, because of his high levels of magical power.

“So, you two don’t feel itchy or irritated at all? That’s not fair at all.”

Theo smiled wryly as Camilla took her anger out on them unreasonably. That expression of his was in stark contrast to the mask he wore when they had first met. Those dull eyes now felt warm, his face lit up amiably.

“The two of us grew up here, so we got used to the miasma after a while. People born here usually build up a tolerance to it. Most folk in town probably don’t notice any itching at all, honestly.”

Hmm? Camilla managed to bite back her foul mood as she turned and paced the other way.

Certainly, this town was synonymous with manastone mining. Living so close to manastone veins, they must encounter dense amounts of miasma on a regular basis. Only Camilla’s skin, nurtured in the comfortable and miasma-less capital, would be affected so dramatically.

“But even so, it can still get rough at times. That’s why Irma… Hey, where did Irma go?”

“…She was here up until a moment ago.”

The two men seemed confused as they looked around. There were only those two men standing in the room, Camilla hadn't seen Irma enter at all. Theo left the room as if in a panic, then returned after a few minutes.

As Theo came back, he had an unhappy looking Irma standing by his side. Those strong eyes of hers looked thunderous as she frowned, her mouth bent sulkily. She half hid herself behind Theo as she looked hard at Camilla.

As if trying to calm down Camilla who glared back at the girl instinctually, Theo spoke up.

"Hey, Irma, what are you being so shy about? You're the one who asked me to come with you."

"I'm not being shy!"

Glaring at Theo, Irma stepped forward as if she had made up her mind. She came close to Camilla and squared up in front of her, looking in her eyes. Did she want to have another go?

That tense exchange of glares only lasted a moment, though. Irma, still looking unhappy, took a glass bottle of something out of her sleeve.

Then, she thrust it toward Camilla.

"...This is an ointment that's used around here. It's good at soothing skin that's irritated by miasma. It should stop that itching feeling and settle down any outbreaks and rashes. Foreigners don't do well around miasma, so if you don't use this, you'll be in trouble."

"Huh?" Camilla's voice leaked out as she took the bottle into her hand.

She was ready for another fight, so this was quite anticlimatic. Instead, all she could do was blink in surprise.

"The three of us came here to thank you."

Pulling the still sulking Irma aside, Theo said that.

"It was thanks to you that we managed to survive and escape the underground, not to mention saving Frida's life. Even if you think of us as cold-hearted strangers, I swear we will do our utmost to repay the debt we owe you."

As he said that with an earnest pride, Theo turned to look at Leon and Irma. Meeting his gaze, this time Leon spoke.

"Frida is my younger sister. If it wasn't for you, she wouldn't be alive right now. I will never forget what you've done."

Leon was dead serious as he looked at Camilla. That beauty spot under his eye really did remind her of Frida's.

"Not everyone in this town thinks the same way. There are probably still some people who don't trust you. But if there's anything we can do to help you in the future, I'm sure this town will definitely come together to lend you our strength."

As he stopped talking, Leon, in turn, looked at Irma. Feeling pressured by the twin gazes of both Leon and Theo, she finally gave up.

Closing her eyes, she raised her head and took a step toward Camilla.

“...Back then, the only reason we got out was because you stayed behind. Thank you for helping Frida.”

Saying that, she bowed deeply before Camilla.

Camilla, clutching the bottle in her hand, took a deep breath.

“If...”

The three of them raised their head with a startled look as Camilla spat out that word. Even with just one syllable, it was obvious to them that she had said it with shaking anger.

Of course, Camilla hadn’t calmed down at all. She had already reached her limit.

“If you had something like this, then why didn’t you say so sooner!?”

As Camilla grasped that bottle with a shaking fist, the look on her face was one of utter anguish.

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With only one thing on her mind, Camilla waited for Alois.

“Lord Alois, please take a seat right there.”

“Huh? Um... Okay.”

After dark, Alois returned to the house that they had been lent, but he was taken aback when Camilla suddenly accosted him.

What was Camilla doing in his room? Why is she suddenly barking orders at him like this? Alois had absolutely no idea what was happening, but he still followed Camilla’s command and sat down.

Instead of the customized chair built to carry his weight back at the mansion, he sat down in an ordinary chair whilst Camilla sat opposite to him.

“Please give me your hand.”

“Okay.”

Alois gave Camilla an obedient nod as he held out his palm to her. Grabbing his wrist without any warning, she yanked his hand towards her brusquely.

Ignoring Alois’ surprise, Camilla produced a small container and scooped a large amount of a stiff and thick cream onto his hand. Then, she began to rub it over Alois’ fingers and palm.

A strong and unfamiliar smell burned his nostrils. Was it some kind of medicine? Alois puzzled over it, but he really didn’t know.

“...What exactly are you doing?”

“It’s as you can see.”

Camilla didn’t even look at him as she lathered his skin with the cream with all the passion of a great artist. Having his skin stroked by her slender fingers like that, Alois’ felt like he couldn’t escape her even if he wanted to.

“It stops itching and I was told it also helps with patchy and dry skin. That maid Irma gave it to me.”

Saying that, Camilla shot Alois a glance. As those judgmental eyes of hers pored all over him, Alois felt even more uncomfortable. Had he done anything recently to incur her wrath somehow?

On the day of the disaster, he had left Camilla in the mansion to head out himself. In the first place, despite knowing the danger, he let her accompany him to Einst. He could think of quite a few reasons she would be mad at him, actually.

“Lord Alois, have you ever truly taken care of your skin? Why is it that all the people who live around the mines have beautiful skin, but you don’t live anywhere near a mine yet look like this?”

“...Ah, no. I never really worried about caring for my skin.”

“I would rather you do worry about it!”

Alois' shoulders jumped as Camilla suddenly shouted at him. It seemed like she was upset, but instead of lashing out, she continued to apply the ointment to his skin carefully and thoroughly.

"Apparently, you can find ointments like these at any pharmacist in the mining towns. Normal creams and lotions don't seem to work at all against miasma. The local people here said that was just 'common sense'."

Hmph, Camilla snorted angrily. The daily skin care routine that Camilla had believed in for so long didn't seem to have any effect on stemming the miasma, but Alois didn't have a clue that was actually the main reason she was so annoyed.

"Since I have it on authority that this ointment works well, we ought to stock up before returning. So then, Lord Alois, please make sure to take care of your skin! Otherwise, that itching feeling will be unbearable!"

Camilla looked hard at Alois as she said that.

Since Alois had already long gotten used to the constant itching, he didn't think that healing his skin was all that important. He knew there was medicine like this out there, but he didn't ever feel the need to use it.

But for Camilla, it was probably something very important. She would prefer a man whose features were clean and smooth. Just like Prince Julian's ceramic white skin.

Alois sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. Camilla finished with one hand and had already moved on to the other.

Her thin fingers pulled and pushed the skin on Alois' palm. They didn't have any power to them. Those small hands of hers though, just how many people's lives had they saved under the surface?

"...The people in this town, they've taught you a few things, haven't they?"

"Excuse me?"

"I thought that getting this place to open up their hearts to me was impossible."

Opening his eyes a crack, he could see Camilla's looking back at him. And as she did, Alois showed her an envious smile.

"This town is archaic and xenophobic, the people mired in its traditions and stubborn as mules. Once they've decided to distrust you, it would take heaven and earth to get them to change their mind, so all I hoped to do was keep them at an arm's length. Far from friends, but not sworn enemies either. Yet, somehow, you managed to accomplish in a single day what I had given up on a long time ago."

Alois wasn't the kind of man who could sway the heart of such obstinate people. But Camilla was capricious, impulsive, and recklessly passionate, someone who could confront and ultimately break through to people without reserve.

Through her outbursts of emotion, she drew in close both those who admired and detested her. In her own way, capturing the true feelings of the common people.

Alois knew just how hard it was to draw out what people truly felt. And if you're a man like Alois, people are only going to be more likely to hold their real thoughts in check.

"I really am jealous of you."

"Lord... Alois...?"

Camilla looked confused as she held Alois' big palm with her two hands. After hesitating for a brief moment, Alois clasped his hand around her own.



There wasn't a single lie in the words he spoke... But, they were slightly calculated.

"I admire you and I envy you... But most of all, I'm charmed by you."

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Reflexively pulling herself free of Alois hands, Camilla jumped to her feet.

Alois didn't look after her resentfully after Camilla stepped away. Never trying to grab her trailing hand back, he simply sat there staring at her.

"W-What do you mean by that, so suddenly!?"

"I just said what was I was thinking."

"What you were thinking, you say...!? That was... was...!"

It sounded as if he was trying to court her. But, she was hesitant to truly call him out on it, so Camilla swallowed the word.

"Guh... Say things like that once you've lost half your..."

Camilla's words trailed off as she thought.

– Half his weight?

He was still big, she judged that even if you split him in half he would still be bigger than two regular sized men. In the first place, it's not as if she had a true grasp of just how much he really weighed at the beginning, so it was hard for her to say just what half really was.

But, there was no doubt that he had become leaner than he was before. Looking at him carefully, she could finally see his neck where before it had been completely covered by his multiple chins and his eyes that had once been buried away in his puffy fat face were now more pronounced. He was still round, but the shadows he cast now seemed more human than toad. In fact, was it possible that he had actually already lost half of it...?

"Guh..."

Camilla clenched her palms together as she chewed her lip in vexation. She scowled at Alois, but he didn't shrink away at all, simply looking back at Camilla.

Alois sometimes showed this side to himself. Was it just him being candid? Or honest? When he attacks her in such a straightforward way like that, it was impossible for her to say anything back.

Wait, but wouldn't that mean she lost?

"Just... Half is just the first step...!"

Shaking her head furiously, Camilla found a new determination.

Because as someone she could bear to kiss and marry, Alois was still far away from Camilla's ideal. That outrageously disgusting toad had just turned into a fat frog, that's all.

Just as she had said from the beginning, Camilla intended to turn Alois into a man that would turn them all green with envy. When he was, Camilla would parade Alois around the capital arm in arm, lording it over all those who had messed with her.

Right now, no one could call Alois handsome. There were still so many things she needed to fix about him. That rough and pockmarked skin most of all. Not to mention, he still looked fat, his hair greasy and that fashion sense of his utterly miserable to boot.

Until she fixed every last one of those points, achieving her goal was still a far off prospect.

“The next step will be to turn that leftover fat of yours into muscle! Until those flabby arms of yours that are somehow softer than mine are strong and hard, I can't accept it at all!!”

As Camilla made that declaration, Alois smiled bitterly. Glaring at him, Camilla wracked her brain over those troubling words that he had spoken before.

She couldn't bring herself to accept it.

It?

– Accept what?

Camilla didn't have an answer to that.

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About a month had passed since the manastone disaster in Einst.

The assessment of the underground tunnels and caverns had long since been completed, and the town was in the process of rebuilding.

After cleaning up the rubble, the next step was to begin new land reclamation projects that avoided building over the manastone veins. New homes had to be built and roads mended, with the townsfolk being ever more conscious of the ground beneath their feet than they had been before.

By now, most of the displaced families in town had been moved back into solid buildings. They were large, yet simple buildings that could house many people at one time. Even if they weren't lavishly decorated, they served to keep out the wind and rain so they were much better than sleeping in a tent.

Now that the new areas to be reclaimed were being decided on and the tasks that lay before the people became clear, the revival of the town could truly begin.

The spirit of that town, as well as its people whose spirits had sunk, began to stand tall and look forward to the day their pride would be restored.

And taking a leading role were the people who came all the way from Grenze to support them.

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"You asked for help from the people of Grenze!?"

A month ago, after being told as much by Alois, Camilla was left stupefied.

The feud between Einst and Grenze was infamous, Camilla had realized just how badly that bad blood ran after coming to Einst herself.

The two towns stood in stark contrast to one another. Irreverent yet vibrantly full of life, that was Grenze. Obstinate yet with a modest sort of pride, that was Einst. The reason they logged heads was unfortunately due to them both being mining towns that competed to support Mohnton's economy.

If it weren't for that single point of similarity, these two towns likely wouldn't even pay the other a single thought. Instead, each town constantly compared themselves to their counterpart and, especially for Einst, usually wallowed in a sense of jealous inferiority.

Since Einst was like this, calling for help from Grenze of all places must have been completely out of the question. Especially since Einst was even more on edge after the disaster. Not to mention Einst's usually xenophobic attitude, it seemed like a recipe for all sorts of further disaster.

Camilla herself thought it was utterly unreasonable.

"It's the closest major town to Einst, not to mention that the people from Grenze are skilled and well-versed when it comes to manastone veins and miasma."

Camilla shuddered at the thought, but Alois seemed to be quite calm about the whole thing.

“Falsch is a mountainous town and isn’t anywhere nearby, it would take them too long to send aid. Right now, Blume has its own problems to deal with. I did also call for support from back home, but right now the best course of action is to bring in help from Grenze. Since that town mines almost as much as this place does, they aren’t just knowledgeable, but the people there are also strong.”

“Well... I suppose that’s true, but...”

She couldn’t poke any holes in Alois’ logic. What’s more, the people in Grenze had probably dealt with similar disasters in the past, albeit on a smaller scale. Even if the threat had faded somewhat since the initial crisis, having people around who knew how to identify and take measures against manastone vein instability and miasma outbreaks would be a great help.

Most of all, however, Grenze was the closest town nearby to Einst. There shouldn’t be any need to call people from further afield.

She knew it. That much at least was easy to understand. Alois’ choice was the most logical and pragmatic option available to him.

– Yet.

She didn’t have a sound counterargument, but something in her heart made her wary of his words.

As Camilla pondered in silence, Alois smiled at her.

It was a gentle expression, as if he were trying to relieve her of worry.

“Besides, this might serve to be a good opportunity, perhaps the two towns might become a bit more amicable. Isn’t it in times like these that you can see people’s true feelings, after all?”

Once again, she couldn’t find much fault with Alois’ calmly expressed idea.

But, Camilla couldn’t just bring herself to nod along obediently either.

Was he taking advantage of Einst’s moment of weakness? That’s all Camilla could think about.

○

Thinking about it properly, Alois wasn’t the kind of person to let his true feelings show on his face.

It wasn’t as if he never got angry, but he usually tried to keep his emotions level. Thinking back, the only times Camilla could really recall him losing control of his emotions were when they argued at the orphanage in Grenze and when Nicole broke that keepsake dish of his.

He had a strong measure of self-control. Indeed, in terms of being a lord, it was a virtue to have such firm reign over one’s own emotions.

That cool line of thinking lead him to the “most correct” decision to bring in reinforcements from Grenze.

Although there were some small scuffles at first, people soon learned that they had little choice but to cooperate in such a situation. As they worked hard together to rebuild the town, it wasn’t long before some of those cold looks and insults became laughs and smiles.

Walking through the streets, the people from Einst and Grenze walked and worked side by side. There was still a bit of resistance from the more influential men and women of the town, but for the townspeople who came into contact with these hardworking outsiders every day, their attitudes didn't take long to change.

– It is a nice thing to see.

From the beginning, Camilla thought that people from the same territory quarreling with one another was ridiculous. That stuffy air of Einst, which almost seemed to shut itself off to the world, irritated Camilla in more ways than one. By opening up the windows and learning to accept new people, the town would change for the better.

– It is a nice thing, yet...

Einst was surely moving in the right direction, probably all according to Alois' intentions.

But, Alois' plans extended far beyond one mere town. As the lord of this land, his thoughts always lay with the territory as a whole.

Yet, Camilla just couldn't bring herself to think in the same way. Those thoughts of hers that she couldn't find a way to express in words swirled in her chest like a whirlpool.

Despite the potential for clashes, there was no doubt that Alois calmly saw an opportunity in the aftermath of this disaster.

No.

– Rather than calm, isn't he being cold?

Flustered, Camilla tried to drive that thought from her head as she racked her brains while in that room of hers that she had been given in Einst.

Alois, the townspeople, and the helpers that arrived from Grenze. Everyone's only thought was helping to rebuild the town. To be thinking about such a thing when everyone was trying to work so hard, Camilla felt like she was the one who was being cold and calculating instead.

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“Ahh, jeez! Just sitting here thinking about this all alone won’t get me anywhere!”

Even if there was no one there to hear it, Camilla shouted in a familiar way as she got to her feet.

This wasn’t the time to get absorbed in thoughts like these.

In situations like this, the best thing she could do was get out of the house until she felt better. Maybe things would get resolved without her having to worry about it, that was what Camilla hoped. Either that, or by getting absorbed in something else she might be able to get her mind off it.

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That’s why Camilla was now in the kitchen, just a slither of time before noon.

The kitchen was already packed full of people getting ready to cook.

Most of the hastily built temporary homes didn’t have kitchens in them. They usually didn’t even have their own bathrooms either. When they said that these homes were to be temporary, they really did mean that. The best thing you could really say about them was that they had four walls and a roof.

Therefore, communal facilities had to be hastily erected as well. Another large building was constructed near the temporary residences, replete with kitchens, bathing areas and restrooms, made free to use by all.

And inside the communal kitchen in that place was Camilla. The kitchen, which was constructed in a way that it could be easily taken apart later, had an oven that was a nightmare to ignite and a kiln that was cumbersome to bake bread in. Bumpy and mismatched countertops were placed side by side to form a bench.

On top of a faulty and worn-out furnace a brand new pot sat in complete disparity. Chopping up ingredients and adding them to that big pot were the cooks and chefs of the Montchat family, who had travelled all the way from the capital.

After a month, help had come from further afield than just Grenze. The relief from Grenze had mostly come in the form of physical labour, whilst from the capital Alois had made gold and supplies flow.

The land had begun to stray into the winter months. On top of that, the land of Mohnton was the northernmost territory of the Kingdom of Sonnenlicht. So in Einst, a land even further north than the territory’s capital, the biting chill had already begun to set in. Those few farmed fields around the mining town had already begun to wither away, with the animals themselves shepherded inside for the season. Left to their own devices, what could they eat? Toxic plants or poisonous toads out of the bogs? With their food reserves ruined, the looming specter of starvation hung very ominously over the people of Einst, who had only just begun to find their feet after that disaster.

Therefore, in the aftermath of the calamity, meals were provided for the people of Einst. Led by the cooks employed by the Montchat household, cooked food was distributed to the people daily, and Camilla often pitched in.

For Camilla, who had neither physical nor magical strength enough to help in the rebuilding and reclamation process, the least she could do was help prepare ingredients for the cooks.

At first, the people there were a bit anxious about having Camilla in the kitchen, but after she put in a few shifts they didn't mind her being there at all.

Right now, Camilla was dicing up vegetables alongside the other chefs and didn't look out of place at all whilst doing it. Camilla, of course, was very picky about making sure the vegetables were thoroughly washed and peeled before she cut them up.

○

“...About Lord Alois?”

Theo and Leon exchanged looks with one another, as they carried large sacks of wheat into that busy kitchen.

“That's right. I want to know exactly what kind of impression you have of him.”

With the knife she was using to slice up the vegetables in hand, Camilla turned to look at the two manservants whose faces she had gotten used to.

Theo and Leon looked a bit puzzled at the sudden line of questioning. Wondering just how to answer her, they did their best to answer without causing any offense.

“I suppose he's a calm person, but why are you asking that so suddenly?”

“Just a whim. I was curious about what the two of you thought of him, that's all.”

She was still worried about just exactly what Alois was thinking, so Camilla decided to do something herself. If people in town were happy with Alois and with what he was doing, then everything should be fine. In a way, by listening to the thoughts of the townspeople, she hoped to avail herself of her own doubts.

“...I see?”

Theo nodded in a way that implied he didn't see what she was doing at all. He nudged Leon who stood next to him as if asking for help.

“Lord Alois is a mild-mannered and serious man. In his own way, he always seems calm and measured. No matter what kind of attitude or words he received from the influential people of Einst in the past, he never once lost his cool.”

“Hmm,” Camilla mused to herself. This town had always had a prickly attitude against Alois. Camilla had never actually witnessed those sorts of clashes in person, but it wasn't hard for her to imagine what it was like when she thought about how she was received here originally.

“I always wondered just how he stopped himself flying into a rage. But, he really is a sharp man. He managed to always parry the most barbed questions and hostile remarks. What can I really say? That he's quite incredible, a man who doesn't make any mistakes? It's hard for me to find any fault with him.”

“I wasn’t asking for you to find any faults.”

As Camilla said that, Theo smiled wryly.

“Still, I wonder just why it was? Most people here still didn’t like him all the same.”

“Oh, but things are different now,” Theo added in a hurry, but Theo’s amendment didn’t matter much to Camilla.

“Why did people not like him? Are you quite sure about that?”

It was a simple question. He hadn’t made any mistakes, so what complaints could they have had? As Theo had said, he was calm and level-headed, there didn’t seem to be much about him that was detestable.

In that case, just why did they dislike him so much?

As Camilla asked him that, Theo looked a little put on the spot.

“Hmmm... Well, I don’t know if that was the problem per-say. Whether or not he was an excellent speaker or flawless at his job, things would be the same. Honestly, I don’t think Alois had a chance to begin with.”

“...Something along those lines, is it?”

Camilla spoke with a sigh. She couldn’t sympathize with the townsfolk, but she understood them.

Personal feelings didn’t always follow any logical rules, people simply disliked whatever it was they disliked. To overcome those ingrained emotions, merely being ‘excellent’ wasn’t nearly enough.

“But, like I said, things are different now. Honestly.”

Theo said that encouragingly to Camilla, whose eyes trailed down to the chopping board in front of her unwittingly. She wasn’t actually upset by what he had said, but Theo himself didn’t know that. As Camilla raised her hand to continue slicing up the potatoes piled up beside her, Theo gave her a smile.

“We saw it ourselves since we got out of the underground before you did. How Alois rushed past us all alone, back through the tunnels.”

Back then, Alois who had helped those people trapped underground get towards the surface using his magic was directing the relief effort. Despite the fear and confusion of everyone around him, Alois managed to remain calm and in control, despite yelling instructions loud enough to be heard above the din. He didn’t make any misjudgments and all of his commands were correct. Every order he gave was given with the sole intention of saving more lives.

But, things changed the moment he saw Nicole escape from the tunnels without anyone by her side. It was then that he learned that not just had Camilla been trapped underground, but she had also yet to emerge.

Alois split away from everyone else without a second thought, suddenly plunging back into those tunnels alone. It was obvious how dangerous and reckless a move it was since those tunnels could have completely caved in at any moment.

“He completely lost his cool and acted as if he didn’t hear anyone around him, it was a little surprising to see him suddenly change like that. Everything did turn out alright in the end, but Lord Alois could just have easily been caught up in a collapse and never come back out. I don’t think anyone else there would have done the same.”

“...Is that so?”

Camilla answered calmly, but her eyes wandered. Her hand didn’t stop moving, cutting up the potatoes even faster and finer than she had before.

– Lord Alois did that for me, then.

“I guess to make a person like that lose their cool, you must be quite close? Everyone saw him a little different after that happened too.”

“R-Right.”

Try as she might, she couldn’t stop her mouth loosening. It didn’t feel bad at all. Alois was beginning to be accepted by the people of this town. Surely, soon enough, Alois might actually be able to win them over to his side. Thinking about that...

– Wait, just why am I so happy about it!?

She swept away the cut up potatoes, which she had accidentally reduced to utterly minute portions through her unconscious knife work, off the chopping board with an angry wave of her hand. Turning back towards the manservant in a fluster, Theo couldn’t help but smile.

“Well, that’s how it is. That’s probably why she thought he looked like a prince, too.”

“Hey!”

Leon interjected suddenly out of nowhere as if trying to shut Theo up. Having been instructed by the head chef in the middle of their conversation to carry his sack of wheat to the back end of the kitchen, Leon rushed over towards Theo as if he were in some sort of panic. That man has an awfully keen ear.

Striding up to Theo angrily, Leon grabbed his shoulder.

“Hey, that’s my sister you’re talking about! Don’t say anything you shouldn’t.”

“No, I don’t think I said anything particularly important at all, actually?”

He tried to cover himself, but it was too late. The gaffe had already been made.

“What is all this about a ‘Prince’?”

Camilla crossed her arms, looking thunderously at Leon and Theo in turn.

50

That afternoon, the plaza set up next to the kitchen facilities was full of people who had come for their lunchtime meal.

When it was mealtime, everyone would pause whatever work they were doing to come and receive the bread and soup that was being distributed.

People were free to take their meals with them. Families often returned to eat in private, but for the most part, everyone found a place to sit and socialize with others in the plaza as they ate. Thanks to that, the once empty plaza was eventually filled with long tables and plenty of chairs.

It would have been a hard thing to imagine just a little while ago: townsfolk from Einst and Grenze sharing meals at the same table, chatting, and laughing as if they were lifelong friends.

Standing on the edge of that scenery, Irma felt strange as she watched. Would the climax to the feud between their towns that had lasted generations end on such an anticlimactic note? She didn't think it was a particularly good or bad thing... Just a little ridiculous.

"...Ah, Irma, look."

As Irma sighed, a familiar voice called out to her. She frowned as she looked towards the girl who had spoken and was currently standing beside her, Frida, who now leaned on a cane to walk. Those porcelain cheeks of hers were slightly flushed as she looked at something in particular with a twinkle in her eye.

"Lord Alois is eating alongside everyone else. He really does like the same food that we do, then?"

The man that Frida was staring at was of quite a substantial build. Yet that man who was partaking in such meager food despite that figure of his was none other than the person who was infamous outside of this region as the 'Toad of the Swamp, Lord Alois Montchat of Mohnton.

He'd been given that moniker because of his enormously rotund body and horribly rough and pockmarked face, but that name didn't quite fit him as well nowadays. That bulbous and gelatinous flesh of his had been reduced by around half, not to mention his skin seemed to be getting gradually better day by day.

Nevertheless, he was definitely as big as two men combined and that skin condition of his still stood out. It was hardly as if he suddenly looked like some stellar catch for a young lady.

And yet, Frida still gazed at Alois so earnestly. Irma frowned as this girl who was usually as taciturn as her brother, rarely if ever showing any emotion on her face, suddenly looking so smitten.

"Frida, are you sure about doing this?"

As Irma whispered to her, Frida nodded. Looking at those determined eyes of hers, Irma sighed for the umpteenth time that day.

"Don't you think this is being a bit too forward? Who exactly do you think that guy came to rescue? You shouldn't feel like you have to do this."

“I know that, but...”

“Since you can’t walk this well, I helped you all the way here. But don’t think I’m nice enough to hold your hand through this crazy confession of yours.”

“I told you, I’m not confessing! I just wanted to thank him!”

As Irma brusquely told her that, Frida felt flustered as she shook her head in a panic. But if she stares at him with such obvious yearning, her cheeks getting redder by the second, what else could Irma think was on her mind?

“I understand you feel like you owe him for helping you, but you shouldn’t fall in love over something like that. You’re such a beautiful girl, there’ll be a lot of better men out there for you.”

“I know that...”

Frida looked at the floor as if those words had hurt. Seeing those sad eyes of her, Irma shifted on the spot uncomfortably.

“But, I really did come to love him. Watching him over this month only made me love him more. He’s resolute, fair, and kind.”

“He’s kind to everyone, you’re not a special case to him.”

“...Yeah.”

Frida said it like she accepted that, but that trembling body of hers said otherwise. Irma reached out to support her body in a panic, since she was still unstable on her feet. Had Irma’s words really hurt her that much?

But, even if she felt like she might have said too much, she didn’t think she was wrong. The sooner that Frida gave up on this hopeless unrequited love, the better it would be for her.

“So, I’ll tell him. I’ll tell him that I’m thankful. Then after that, once he knows how I really feel, I’ll give up.”

“Unbelievable.”

Irma looked exasperated as she slapped a hand to her forehead.

No matter how thin he is now, she could still remember just what Alois looked like, so it was hard for her to see him as anyone’s potential partner, much less her best friend’s. Although he might be kind, that only led to him seeming bland and inoffensive, far from what Irma thinks a man should act like.

But, just maybe, that’s what Frida saw in him that she liked so much? She just couldn’t get her tastes at all.

She couldn’t understand her preferences, but Irma did know that Frida was serious about this.

“...So be it, I guess. Tell him how you feel. But when he gives you his answer, make sure to give up properly, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Irma.”

As Irma heaved another deep sigh, Frida smiled on her lonesome.

○

As the afternoon wore on, eventually the plaza began to clear. Before Alois could get back to work, however, Frida stopped him and asked to talk.

Irma peeked from the shadows of one of the newly constructed houses, watching over the scene. Even if Frida's voice wasn't the loudest, she was close enough that she could still make out what she was saying. Although all she could see from this angle was Alois' broad back, she could see Frida's anxious face clearly.

Frida said that she would be fine doing it all by herself, but Irma couldn't help but worry about her.

"I wonder if she'll really be okay...?"

"Nah, it'll probably be a miss."

Whilst Irma was speaking to herself, a voice suddenly replied to her out of nowhere.

"But still, I'm surprised she's being this bold. I always thought she was more of the quiet type."

"Frida... You fool."

"...This sort of mood makes it hard to say anything."

"Geh," Irma moaned, knowing exactly who those familiar voices belonged to before she even turned around.

Two men she knew well. And one woman who she had come to know recently. Theo and Leon, as well as Camilla. Just like Irma, the three of them were listening in on Alois and Frida's conversation.

"Why the hell are you...!?"

"Shh! They'll hear you!"

Theo cupped his hand over Irma's mouth quickly. Just why on earth was she being treated like a naughty child suddenly? Irma fumed in silence.

"Lady Camilla, I'm deeply sorry about my younger sister, she's..."

"It's fine. Well, I wouldn't really call it fine... Rather, I am hardly in a position to complain about it."

Camilla and Alois weren't married. In fact, Camilla had made the bold declaration that she wouldn't marry Alois until he was a man she could stand to kiss. That's why, when it came to thinking about suddenly acting like his wife and putting on those airs, Camilla's sensibilities wouldn't allow her to make such an unflattering mockery of herself.

However, those three didn't know anything about Camilla and Alois' private circumstances.

"You're not going to get mad about this?"

When Theo reacted with surprise, Camilla at first responded with a small and enigmatic snort.

"...I suppose whether or not I get mad depends on what Alois has to say."

Saying that, Camilla turned back to watching Alois' back.

Frida was bowing in front of him with a deep sense of gratitude. After expressing the carefully chosen words meant to convey those heartfelt feelings of hers, Alois was about to respond.

The way Alois spoke made it seem as if he chose every syllable very carefully. Those four who watched and listened from the shadows stopped talking at once, straining their ears to hear.

“Frida. Thank you, but...”

51

The afternoon had passed, but it was still too early for dinner.

A chill wind blew through the deserted kitchen.

As the wind ruffled his clothes, Alois peeled the carrot he held in silence. Once he was finished peeling the last of the carrots, he wasn't quite sure what to do.

"Excuse me... Lord Alois."

As Alois quietly worked, the only other person in that kitchen, Camilla, called out to him from behind his back with a slightly tentative voice.

After giving Frida his answer and seeing her off, he had gone to the kitchen and had been peeling carrots the entire time. Camilla was hesitant about approaching him, considering that worrisome atmosphere around the man.

"What's wro-"

"Camilla."

Alois spoke out without turning around, cutting Camilla's words short. His tone wasn't harsh, but it couldn't be considered timid. If anything, it seemed hollow and monotone.

"That girl, do you think I answered her feelings sincerely?"

"...You noticed us?"

"I could hear you."

"Guh," Camilla breathed out uncomfortably, hit by a pang of guilt. It only made sense though. If Camilla and the others were so close that they could hear what Alois had to say, naturally he would be able to hear them as well.

But, it didn't seem as if Alois was angry with Camilla about it. He breathed out and continued to speak, his voice quieter than before.

"Do you think I gave her the wrong answer?"

Even if the tone of his voice didn't betray it, the swirl of anxiety running through him was plain to see. Camilla frowned slightly in silence, then decided to move forward and stand side by side with Alois.

Peering at his face from beside him, it was clear to see just how downcast Alois looked. For the first time since he came into the kitchen, he stopped peeling the vegetables in front of him, turning to look at Camilla as he did. He looked like a child who had just given his teacher an answer to some sort of problem, waiting anxiously to see whether or not she would approve of it.

"...I do not think you were wrong."

As Camilla returned Alois' uneasy gaze, she sighed softly.

The words that Alois had returned to Frida had been kind and considerate, without any intention to hurt the girl's feelings. If she was in the same situation as him, she couldn't think of a better way to reply than the way he had. He hadn't made any mistakes. If she really was a teacher grading his answer, she would have given him a perfect grade.

"But, it wasn't the right answer."

Frida wasn't a teacher. She hadn't given him a problem to solve. What she had wanted to hear wasn't an answer so perfect it could have been rehearsed, but Alois' true feelings. She didn't want to be consoled or persuaded to give up. Even if the answer she wanted might have hurt her, she still wanted to hear it.

Alois, though, hadn't understood that.

Turning back to the counter, Alois began to peel the carrots in silence once again. Was he aware of just how defeated he looked? As Alois stared down at his hands as he worked, those red eyes of his looked more sullen and sunken than ever.

Camilla remembered the time when she accused Alois of 'not being sincere' back at the orphanage in Grenze. When she had said that, Alois truly snapped at her for the very first time. At the time, she thought the reason he had been so angry at the accusation was because he truly considered himself to be 'sincere'.

– It was the other way around.

Camilla's mouth remained closed as she looked at Alois from the side.

Alois is kind. Alois is calm. That's what everyone said about him. He treats everyone the same. Nobody was discriminated against or got special treatment. And yet, was that really how he felt?

– He himself knows just how insincere he is, that's why he lashed out back then.

All that could be heard in the kitchen was the carrot being peeled.

As Camilla's words went unquestioned, the only thing that filled the air was that brisk evening wind.

○

What exactly should they do about all these peeled carrots?

By the time they realized it, those vegetables had piled up in front of them. Camilla and Alois exchanged grimaces as they looked it over. They initiated a quick strategy meeting, pulling in the cooks of the Montchat household who had just arrived in the kitchen to begin preparing dinner.

"We ought to use them for dinner, after all? That said, I hope they are fond of carrots."

"No, no, even if every one of them loved carrots, this goes above and beyond."

At Camilla's suggestion, the head chef shook his head frantically. Even if they used it in the meals distributed to the townsfolk of Einst, the quantity that Alois had peeled in those hours would still leave a lot leftover.

“Sorry about all this. I got a bit lost in thought.”

Alois’ shoulders drooped as he reflected on his rare blunder. Looking at the strangely expressive Alois in front of him, the head chef crossed his arms as he pondered what to do.

“Hmm... What to do, what to do...? If we grate it... Maybe we can make a cake out of it?”

“Cake?”

“That’s right. Lately, the kids in town have been getting annoying, asking for all sorts of sweet things. I didn’t know what to do about it since we barely have any sugar in stock. Carrots have just enough sweetness to them to work though, right?”

Indeed, it wasn’t a bad idea at all. Alois also nodded along in approval. Though whether that was because he thought it was a truly good idea or was just relieved that his mistake might get solved was up in the air.

“In that case, I’ll pitch in and help. Camilla, can you lend me a hand?”

“Ah, no. I’ll excuse myself this time.”

Camilla shook her head as if to throw water over Alois’ newfound enthusiasm.

Cooking was her self-professed hobby and it wasn’t rare to find her in the kitchen. He figured that she would jump at the opportunity to make a cake and took it for granted that she’d agree. So, Alois and the cook both looked quite surprised at Camilla’s sudden refusal.

As the two of them gazed at her in stunned silence, Camilla frowned.

“I cannot make sweet things.”

As if trying to dodge their disbelief, Camilla spoke the truth as vaguely as she could.

52

The daughter of Count Storm, Camilla Storm, is a dangerous woman.

That truly insufferable villainess who did her utmost to torment the baron's daughter, Liselotte, and force the Second Prince Julian under her thumb. Furthermore, it didn't seem as if she was going to be satisfied with simply controlling Duke Alois Montchat like a puppet.

After manipulating the Duke into trusting her, Camilla then spread her foul influence to the town of Einst and the people who lived there. Taking advantage of an unfortunate disaster, she used her wiles to trick the modest people of Einst onto her side.

The people of Einst threw away their history and their traditions as well as their pride and their modesty as they gave themselves up to Camilla.

And much to the horror of all, that wasn't the end of it. Had she used the trouble in Einst as a springboard? It seems like that horrible woman is beginning to influence the youth of Mohnton to her evil ways, especially the youngsters of commoners.

Just how far will this woman go in her quest to steal the territory of Mohnton out from under its people? And after taking over Mohnton, will she then set her sights on the capital?

That dangerous woman called Camilla, a rare and despicable breed of villainess who only rears her head once in a generation, had the potential to shake the very country to its core.

○

To my dearest sister,

My dear sister Camilla [1], it has been some time. Your cute little sister, Therese, thought to write to you once more.

I never received a reply to my last letter, but I'm curious as to how you have been lately? It has been over seven months since you became a bride of the bogs, dear sister. It is truly difficult to hear any word about how you're faring. Father and mother seem not to care, but I must confess I am most worried about you.

Since you've lived in the swamps for so long, have you forgotten how to reply to me with words that humans can read? Or perhaps these letters of mine are getting lost in the bog, only to be read by the toads who live next door to you?

I'm worried about whether or not you've been reading my letters, dear sister. Because of that anxiety of mine, please do forgive me for writing in such a similar way to my last letters. Although, my dear sister, there is something you ought to know...

Sister. I have always held a selfish daydream of one day being able to call you my sister.

Just like I always imagined, father and mother are truly wonderful people as well. It is as if they love me more than their first child. Father said to me 'You must have had a hard time living as a viscount's

daughter. Don't worry, you'll want for nothing here'. And when I mentioned how worried I was about you, sister, he said; 'I don't consider her my daughter anymore. From now on, you are my only child'.

Mother is always doting on me as well, saying things like 'Please don't be modest, feel free to rely on me as selfishly as you like'.

Honestly, I'm so happy. It feels like a dream. Even if my sister is now the wife of a toad, it surely must be very hard to adjust to your new life. Every time I think about the happiness I enjoy every day, I truly feel a pang of conscience for what you must be going through.

...No, a toad will still have their own sort of happiness. I know how truly affectionate you can be, my dear sister. Right now, I'm sure you've found your own happiness, taking care of your new tadpoles.

Oh dear, I wrote a lot more than I intended to. But, I hope you will forgive me. It shouldn't be too long now until I can call you 'my sister' in person, oh dear sister.

It seems as if father is intending to truly disown you for good soon, sister.

Perhaps it was my fault, as I heard from my dear friend, Lady Liselotte, just to what lengths you went to behind Prince Julian's back. Although, on the other hand, I get the feeling that the intention to sever ties with you had already been decided sometime before. Once I told father what I had heard from Liselotte, he yelled 'Oh, why was a daughter like her ever born?' as his face turned red from anger.

But, it wouldn't do to lie to him or keep any secrets. You're a very honest person as well, sister, and I'd like to think we're much alike.

Oh yes, I mentioned that I spoke to Lady Liselotte. She and I have become very good friends.

Liselotte is very kind and lady-like, she provides such a wonderful contrast to you, dear sister. After you were sent off to be married, dear sister, Liselotte has become very close with the Storm family and does a very good job of watching over us. She was deeply worried that the Storm family's reputation would be tarnished by all the stories about you, dear sister. Truly, her gracious feelings touched my heart.

It's only natural that Prince Julian would be charmed by such a girl. Everyone in the country is looking forward to their marriage with deep anticipation.

But... Ah, I wonder if this story has actually reached the Land of Mohnton yet? Their marriage date has already been decided. Once winter has passed, the new year will bring spring. Once the flowers begin to bloom, the wedding ceremony will be held.

Of course, you will be attending with Lord Montchat, will you not? Then, after such a long time apart, I can finally meet you again dear sister.

I truly am looking forward to it.

I truly, truly am.

Even if father and mother say they don't want to see your face ever again, I still want to wait for you as a family. And when we meet again, I'll be able to say it to you in person.

‘Sister’.

From your adorable little sister, Therese.

○

As Therese’s letter was swallowed by the flames, Camilla gazed silently at the blazing hearth.

The papers were reduced to ash and cinders as if they had never taken shape at all. Camilla only wished that the words she had read off those pages could be burned out of her head in much the same way.

Her parents had adopted Therese. The Prince is to be married. Liselotte, Camilla’s mortal enemy, had begun to spread her influence into the Storm family. The words that she had read blew like a gale inside of her head.

– It will be okay.

Breathing out, she raised her face as she bit her lip. She couldn’t keep her head down. She couldn’t stare at the ground like this.

– Just this much isn’t enough to make me cry.

But, she couldn’t shake those feelings of frustration all the same. She was furious. Therefore, she’ll keep looking forward to the day when she would be able to show them all. The Prince, Liselotte, Therese, and even her parents.

She would use Alois to the fullest, turning him into a man that would make ladies swoon and have them all brought low with bitter regret.

Yet, for some reason, Camilla couldn’t imagine that ideal future of hers as clearly anymore.

Everyone would look enviously as she walked arm in arm with Alois, grinding their teeth as Camilla strode by. All the aristocrats and ministers in the palace, as well as those gossiping daughters of the nobility, would be stunned into silence. Camilla’s parents would apologize and beg her forgiveness. Liselotte would be the one whose face twisted in frustration and Julian would regret passing her up from the bottom of his heart.

That was the ideal future she had imagined for herself. Wanting to see their bitter expressions of remorse as she looked down on them, those feelings of hers hadn’t changed either.

Then, just why was it that future wasn’t something she could imagine so vividly as she had before?

[1] – Yes, Therese is calling her ‘Camilla Onee-sama’ now, if you were wondering. And she’s using ‘Onee-sama’ way more than one would usually to drive the point home.

53

It had been over seven months since Camilla had arrived in the Duchy of Mohnton. The land was now languishing in the true depths of the winter season.

Mohnton, located in the northernmost part of the Kingdom of Sonnenlicht, had much harsher cold months than the capital. Although there wasn't much snow around the duchy's capital, the humid wetlands that made up the majority of the territory saw a lot of snowfall during the winter.

– I wonder if Einst is doing well?

It had been a couple of weeks since Camilla and Alois had returned from the town of Einst.

After the assessment of the manastone veins had been completed and the groundwork set for the rebuilding process to begin, there was no more need for Alois to oversee things directly. Leaving some of the people from Grenze as well as his own support staff from the territory's capital, Alois returned home alongside Camilla.

Ever since returning, Alois had shut himself in his room, dealing with the mountain of paperwork that had built up in his absence. Once the winter was over, a new year would dawn along with the spring. There was a seemingly endless amount of matters that had to be attended to before the new year began.

Camilla, on the other hand, was relatively free. Even though she had been in Mohnton for the better half of a year, her role in this land was still vague at best, for the most part being treated as Alois' guest.

So what should she do to pass the time? Talk with Nicole? Get pulled into one of Alois' exhaustive study sessions? Or, perhaps...

—

“Oi! Keep an eye on what you're doing! It's burning ain't it!”

By the time she realized, it was too late. The frying pan that Camilla held was already beginning to billow with smoke. The sauce had turned an ominous shade of black and had begun to smoke. In a hurry she killed the flame, but it was already far too late.

The man who stood beside Camilla didn't try to hide his anger, as he yelled in exasperation.

“Don't doze off like that when you're cooking! It's dangerous!”

“Doze off, you say!? ...Fine! It was my fault, satisfied!?”

“At least pretend to be a little modest when you apologize!!”

The man who scolded Camilla was middle-aged with fiery red hair and a face to match his anger. It was the chef who didn't match the exquisite delicateness of his cooking, Günter.

“So at least listen to what I have to tell ya! You've got to pay attention to what you're doing! Cooking ain't just about the ingredients!”

“I know that! That's why I said it was my fault!”

“Howd’ya expect me to take you seriously when you’re acting so high and mighty still!?”

Despite her apology, Günter didn’t seem satisfied at all. As they argued, hoots of ‘You’re too harsh!’ and ‘Ain’t ya going overboard!?’ echoed through the kitchen.

Those jeers were coming from Günter’s fellow cooks who also worked for the Montchat family.

“Oi, head chef, we finally got a girl in the kitchen, what’ll we do if you drive her out!?”

“That kinda guy doesn’t even know just how wonderful girls are at all, huh!?”

“Shaddup! If she quits over somethin’ this, then she wasn’t worth my time anyways!!”

As the voices jeered against him, Günter snapped angrily at his subordinates. But their laughter didn’t stop, their voices perked up again straight away.

“Hey now don’t burden her too much. She’s just a girl after all!”

“Well I am sorry for being a burden to you!!”

Camilla couldn’t stop herself turning around and snapping at the hecklers. At Camilla’s angry shout, the sound of wolf whistles sounded through the kitchen.

It was late afternoon, a few hours before that night’s dinner. There were only a few cooks in that kitchen who were starting to prepare for the dinner service. None of them seemed particularly concerned with Camilla being around, having long since gotten used to her already.

Even though Camilla raised her voice at them, they just shrugged their shoulders with a smirk. ‘You tell ’em!’ ‘So cool!’ they shouted out with claps.

How detestable.

– Don’t you dare make a fool out of me.

“Don’t you look at me like that! If I got serious, you wouldn’t stand a chance against me!!”

“Maybe you should start with not burning my damned ingredients first then!”

Günter remarked half in anger and half in exasperation as Camilla berated the nearby cooks. Then he himself glared at the spectators.

“As for you lot, get back to work! If you don’t want to be outdone by this girl here, then do your damned jobs!”

As Günter spat that out at them, the cooks laughed amongst themselves before slowly slinking back to their stations. He was the Head Chef. With the kitchen as his domain, he wielded power over all, including Camilla. That too was frustrating in its own way.

Camilla had become acquainted with Günter before travelling to Einst. She had challenged him to a battle of cookery, not knowing that he was the head chef of the Montchat family, suffering a de facto defeat for her efforts. Camilla often spent her time in the kitchen from that point on. Her goal was to take all of Günter’s skill for her own and one day defeat him in cooking.

Günter, who was never without complaints, thus taught Camilla, who hated nothing more than losing.

As she learned, she began to learn the faces of the cooks who also worked in the kitchen. Those people who were initially shocked and wary of Camilla's sudden appearance in their workplace seemed quite used to her by now. Even if Camilla often got angry at the joking atmosphere of the kitchen, they didn't mind much.

Rather, if it was just a joking atmosphere, it would have been fine.

Every one of the chefs employed by the Montchat household were men. In Mohnton, cooking was a common virtue. At home there was no divide between men and women in the kitchen, but those social norms shifted when it came to the workplace.

Cooking was considered an important skill in Mohnton. So in that same vein, it was a considered an honourable career. A professional kitchen wasn't a place for women and children to play around.

Therefore, the sudden appearance of Camilla in their workplace presented them with a fresh opportunity.

"Oi, don't mind them. You know they don't mean any harm."

"I know that."

Camilla said that, pursing her lips.

They were all men who had dedicated themselves to cooking from a young age. Their hands held knives and stirred pots day in and day out. 'She's just a rich girl who came to learn a bit of cooking', they would say about Camilla, who would simply come and go when she had time to spare. When that stranger to the kitchen would be on the receiving end of Günter's anger, they would say to themselves 'That poor girl'.

"...What's wrong, you not up to it today?"

When Camilla didn't reply to him, Günter looked down at her with a worried frown.

"Usually you'd say something like 'Don't look down on me! We are moving onto the next dish now!', y'know?"

"Just who on earth do you think I am?"

"At least when you're in my kitchen, you're a cheeky rookie cook who is too damn big for their boots."

With a gruff look on his face, Günter kept looking at her. Being stared at so strictly like that, Camilla groaned.

"That stubborn attitude of yours is one of your few good points, though. If you lose that, then what do you even have left? So, what happened?"

What's wrong? Even if he asked Camilla that, she didn't really have an answer for him.

As she thought, Camilla didn't look up at him.

"Oh, what a rarity. There's a girl in the kitchen!"

Then, from the entrance to the kitchen, she heard the voice of an unfamiliar man. Compared to that man's floaty and joking voice, the heavy sighs from all the other men in the kitchen provided a stark contrast. Standing next to Camilla, Günter looked like he was at his wit's end.

Wondering just who it was, Camilla turned to look at the newcomer.

"Whoa~! She looks a little uptight though! But that black hair sure is nice. Hey, do you know who I am?"

"I haven't the slightest."

Standing in front of her was a young man with light brown hair and eyes to match. He had a delicate sense of beauty to him as well as an elegant looking and slender build. If it wasn't for those heavy-set bedroom eyes of his, she could compare him to Prince Julian. But that flirty attitude was so off-putting, it spoiled her good impression of his looks.

Of course, Camilla had never met this man before. Judging by his clothes, he must be a cook of some sort. However, even though Camilla had been in the kitchen many times now, she didn't recognize his face at all.

"Well then, please be sure to remember it from now on. I'm Klaus."

Without being daunted by Camilla's curt and unfriendly answer, Klaus smiled and introduced himself. Then, as if ignoring the angry stares of the other cooks, calmly strode over to Camilla.

He only stopped approaching when he stood right in front of her. Even though Camilla glared at him, Klaus didn't seem to worry much, even flicking her a wink.

"I am Klaus Lörriich, eldest son of the Lörriich family, and one day the world's greatest chef. As for a lover, I'm currently free."



And in that way, saying that it was lovely to meet her, he offered Camilla his hand.

54

Klaus Lörriich.

The eldest son of the Lörriich baronial family, the man that Günter had once told Camilla about, the ‘Skipping Devil’.

He was twenty years of age. Because of his good looks and easy-going nature, as well as his well-to-do background, he was very popular with the young women who worked in the mansion. However, since the only reason girls ever came all the way to the bowels of the kitchen before Camilla arrived was to look for him, he was detested like a snake in the crib by the other cooks.

But no matter how much he ducked out of work to chase skirts, the other cooks couldn’t voice their disgruntlement with him openly.

There were three reasons for that.

The first was that he was the eldest son of Baron Lörriich.

When it came to the servants who directly served in the Montchat household, many of them were linked to those three powerful founding families. And of course, the influence of those families ran very deep in these lands. To put it simply, picking a fight with the man who could one day become the head of the Lörriich family would be setting sail for catastrophe.

The second reason was that the man was a genius.

No one in that kitchen could hold a candle to his raw skill. Not even Günter could match him when it came to baking confectionaries. No matter how much time he spends skipping work or playing with girls, that impressive ability of his didn’t fade at all. Compared to the other cooks who devoted themselves all day to their craft, Klaus merely needed to spend a few hours in the kitchen to match their output.

His cooking, of course, tasted excellent. What’s more, the presentation of his dishes was both so beautiful and so effortless it bruised the ego of anyone who had to line their food up next to his.

Lastly, Alois favoured him.

The rumours everyone had heard about Klaus, the prodigal son of the Lörriich family, was that his father had grown sick of his attitude and kicked him out of the house in effect, but not in law disinheriting him. Therefore, before Klaus left the Mohnton lands as was once his intention, Alois managed to convince him to work for the Montchat household.

Even after being taken into the Montchat household, Klaus continued his irreverent attitude and didn’t show any respect for Alois either, but Alois never seemed to mind. No matter how many people spoke into his ear about Klaus’ unbelievable attitude, Alois kept him in his job.

Was it purely because he was addicted to the taste of Klaus’ baking and sweets? That was the rumour going around, at least.

On the top of the biscuits that Klaus had baked, he decorated them with a frosting made from egg whites and sugar.

Red, blue, white and yellow. He drew vibrantly coloured petals, overlapping the colours in perfect contrast. The petals were traced onto the biscuits in wonderful multicoloured layers that made them look like real flowers.

Rather than a patisserie frosting a baked treat, it was more like an artist painting on a canvas. Even the most minute detail was exquisitely expressed with rich colour.

“Beautiful, huh?”

Catching Camilla staring gobsmacked at his work, Klaus grinned. With a boastful smirk on his face, he held up a cookie decorated with immaculately realized white flowers.

“This is one of Blume’s specialities. The Sehnsucht flower, ever heard of it?”

“Not at all.”

Looking closely, those white flowers were mixed with a slight hint of red. The petals were thin and rounded at the ends. They gave off a beautiful, yet fragile impression.

She had never been much for flower viewing even back in the capital. Of course, not much had changed after she had been exiled to Mohnton, either.

“When spring comes, they come into full bloom and are used in all sorts of perfumes. Sehnsucht, the flower of desire. And so I will give this to you, the one with equally beautiful black hair.”

Saying so, Klaus pressed the biscuit into her hands without giving her a moment to reply.

Looking at the biscuit that was adorned with intricately detailed flowers despite being smaller than the palm of her hand, Camilla frowned.

– Just how on earth was he able to make something like this?

She didn’t care much for Klaus’ manners, but she couldn’t deny that his talent was the genuine article. Seeing it in person, she could understand why no one debated his skill. But no matter how good his technique was, his character just didn’t match up at all.

Apparently, these biscuits were being baked for Alois.

When it struck his fancy every now and again, he would bake things like this for Alois. Usually, they were vividly coloured confectionaries like these.

Whenever Klaus worked, he couldn’t help but catch the eyes of everyone else in the kitchen. As if looking for the secret to his genius in order to usurp him, those ambitious cooks would watch his every move as he plied his craft.

But Klaus didn’t care about their lingering gazes. If they wanted to steal his skill, let them try as much as they liked. With a smile on his lips, he lined up the biscuits he had decorated row by row on a deep dish.

“And now, for the final touch...”

Looking down on the plate covered with every biscuit but the one that Camilla held in her hand, arrayed like a field of flowers, Klaus’ grin grew even wider.

Taking the bottle of maple syrup he held in his hand, he gently unscrewed the lid and poured its contents all over the biscuits, desecrating the scene of floral beauty. The golden syrup drowned out the vibrant colour of the flowers as they sunk into its overwhelmingly goopy sweetness.

Klaus laughed mockingly, his eyes narrow.

“There we go, food fit for a pig in the blink of an eye!”

Instinctively, Camilla threw the biscuit she held down on the countertop in a rage.

“What did you just say...!?”

The biscuit broke into pieces, that beautiful flower pattern shattered. She didn’t regret doing it. Right now, she didn’t care about that lovely looking thing.

“Just now, what did you say?”

“Oh, are you upset?”

As Camilla glared furiously at him, Klaus shrugged as if he hadn’t expected her reaction at all. But his hands didn’t stop moving. After emptying the contents of the maple syrup bottle onto the cookies, he took a jar of sugar and began to sprinkle its contents all over the top of it.

“That’s just how it is. What else other than a pig would eat something like this? Would you ever want to eat it?”

“Isn’t that the food your master is going to eat!?”

“So what? This disgusting trough of sugar won’t suddenly become delicious just because my master is eating it. Besides, even if I have to call him ‘master’, I still hate the guy.”

“Hate!? But... Isn’t this just because of the Montchat tradition!?”

The master of the Montchat family will always have the best food. And to them, the best food was stuffed full of all sorts of luxuries, meaning all manner of fat, sugar, and oil.

That’s what both Alois and Gerda had told her. Camilla had always thought it was ‘strange’ herself, but...

If Camilla was still the same as when she arrived, she might have agreed with Klaus’ words. In fact, if they were purely talking about the ‘meal’ in front of them, Camilla’s thoughts were still the same. The food that Alois consumed was unspeakably grotesque to her. Far more than Camilla not wanting to eat it herself, she didn’t think it was fit for human beings at all.

– Then just why am I so angry?

“But, I’m not part of the Montchat-”

Klaus’ words were cut off mid-sentence with a thud.

From above, a fist smacked him upside the head.

“Shaddup already.”

“Ouuuuch... Take it easy on me, head chef.”

Günter didn't say anything to Klaus' pleading. Threatening him with his raised fist again, he instead turned to Camilla.

“You should leave for today.”

“Me!? Shouldn't that rude fellow be the one to leave instead!?”

“I don't need someone who spends more time yelling than working in my kitchen. I can tell you're off your game today, too. You can come back once you've cooled off a bit.”

“But he was the one who made me angry!”

As she pointed an outraged finger at Klaus, the culprit waved his hand at her with a smile on his face. It was as if he was saying *au revoir*.

“The fact is that you're the one who lost their temper. Anyways, just take a breather and calm down. No matter how much you shout and scream, it just goes in one ear and out the other with that guy.”

Camilla bit her bottom lip angrily. Günter seemed dead set on having Camilla leave for now.

It was true that Camilla was the one who was disturbing the workplace right now. None of the other cooks seemed to share her anger about Alois being disrespected like that. It's as if they've already just accepted that's how Klaus is.

Even if it's wrong, it's just Klaus being Klaus.

– If you want me to leave so badly, so be it!

Camilla tried to stem her frustration as she balled up her hands into fists. As she turned on her heel to leave in a huff, she heard a mocking voice call out behind her.

“Later~. Next time you drop by, I'll teach you how to make some sweets.”

“I will not be making anything like that!”

“Why not? If it's me doing the teaching, you'll be a prodigy in no time. Don't you have someone you want to have eat the food you make? You've got to get to a guy through his stomach, y'know? I wouldn't mind being that guy, either.”

At his last line, Camilla turned around and scowled at the grinning Klaus.

“There is someone I would like to eat my cooking.”

That wasn't Klaus, of course. Nor was it Alois.

Yes, not even Alois.

There was only ever one person in her mind, that had never changed.

“Therefore, I will not be making any sweets.”

Leaving that line hanging in the air, Camilla turned her back once again on Klaus and strode out of the kitchen.

Fun German lesson from someone who doesn't know any German: Blume means flower, Sehnsucht means longing or yearning.

Comment replies should be working again.

“Oh, so you met Klaus, then?”

Camilla stomped her way straight from the kitchen all the way to Alois, where her complaints were met with a grimace.

Alois was in his office, buried up to his neck in a mountain of documents as he sat at his desk.

But just for now, he set aside his pen. Who knows if that was because he was truly worried about Camilla’s concerns, or he pragmatically realized that ignoring her in that obviously enraged state of hers would be a very unwise move?

Camilla herself felt guilty for interrupting Alois, who was obviously in the weeds. At least, she thought that feeling was guilt. But even if she felt guilty, that feeling came second to her anger.

““Oh, so you met him’, my foot! Did you not hear a word of what I just told you!? He called your meal, ‘pig’s food’, Lord Alois!”

– Pig.

Camilla herself had often cursed the man in front of her a toad or a frog, because of his round belly and rough skin. Even if her social position compared to Alois didn’t give her leeway to call him that, the man himself didn’t seem interested in refuting her words, so there wasn’t really a problem.

At least, Camilla does not call him a pig. There was something sharper to those words compared to the word ‘frog’, a deeper sense of malice and mockery imbued in them.

“In the first place, Lord Alois, you are not even that much of a pig anymore! You are just a bit meatier than the average person!”

Seven months had passed since she first met Alois. His neck was no longer ringed with excess chins, and his eyes and mouth were no longer obscured by the fat puffing out his face. Even his toadish skin was beginning to improve bit by bit thanks to the ointment she had brought from Einst.

Slowly and steadily, he was surely escaping the frog zone. All that remained was to shave away the last of the flab, chisel the sagging meat on his arms into muscle, pick out a new wardrobe, and tackle that greasy mop on top of his head he had the gall to call hair. Then, perhaps, he might be ready to face the public eye. His skin was still the biggest hurdle, but that could be vaulted through liberal use of makeup.

“Thank you very much... Wait, should I be thanking you?”

Alois was always quick to deride himself, but this time he laughed unusually loudly. Was the reason he wasn’t hurt at all because he had begun to understand just who Camilla was?

No...

“Why are you fine with this!?”

If he truly understood Camilla, he wouldn’t have laughed.

“Do not say thank you! Shouldn’t you feel some shame in being told such a thing!? Are you simply going to let this lie in such a way!?”

Even though Camilla had been the one who had said it, she was the only one who got angry. But because Alois simply took the insult on the chin with a laugh, she felt like a fool getting frustrated all by herself, which ironically only made her angrier.

“The only people who say things like that to me are you and Klaus, you know?”

Alois shrugged his shoulders as he said that.

“He’s a good man.”

“A good man!?”

Just what part of him could ever be called good? Camilla couldn’t help but repeat his words back at him incredulously.

It’s true that his face wasn’t bad at all. That’s only ever more apparent when she compared that face of his she remembered to Alois’ who sat in front of her now. His curly hair was neatly combed into shape whilst he wore his chef whites in an unorthodox yet presentable way, somehow making them look fashionable. What’s more, he had an intrinsically stylish air to how he walked and carried himself.

For a fleeting moment, she thought that fair skin and slender form of his held a candle even to Prince Julian.

But as fine as his appearance was, that attitude of his spoiled everything. Klaus was rude and disrespectful, not knowing his place at all.

In the first place, Camilla hated frivolous flirts like that.

“He’s not a good man at all! If we were to compare, then you-”

– You?

Camilla swallowed back the words that would have followed.

She felt the passions that had flared up in her from the moment she stomped back from the kitchen cooling down rapidly. Not believing the strange words that were about to tumble out of her mouth, Camilla blinked in disbelief.

Taking a deep breath and then releasing it, Camilla cast her eyes down. That unnatural silence only lasted a few seconds, but it felt like a lifetime. After a few moments, Camilla continued where she left off, her voice changing pitch oddly as she repeated that word.

“...Julian. Prince Julian is a far better man.”

She was barely thinking about the anger she held towards Klaus anymore.

“I feel sorry for him, suddenly being compared to His Highness.”

Alois breathed something halfway between a sigh and a laugh as he listened to Camilla's words. There was a faint melancholy in that expression of his.

"He is incomparably superior when it comes to personality and appearance... And most importantly of all, he's the man you fell in love with."

"...Yes."

Fell in love. She truly did love him, but that love of hers never bore fruit. She had suffered both a broken heart and severe retribution from the man she had so earnestly loved.

Still, Camilla could never forget.

To Camilla, he was the only man she had ever thought of that way. Back then, still now, and forever.

– No matter how much he might hate me, I still love him.

"There's no man that can compare to Prince Julian."

Saying that as if she were convincing herself, Camilla clenched her fists and raised her face.

The first thing she saw was Alois. All the while she had kept her eyes on the floor, he must have been looking at her. Camilla could see herself reflected in those red eyes of his that were slightly narrowed.

"You truly do love him, then?"

"That's right. My love for him won't ever change."

"Hmm," Alois breathed out as he rubbed his chin, his expression difficult to read. Then after a moment's hesitation, he asked Camilla a question without taking his eyes off her.

"Can I ask just how you came to love him the way you do?"

Camilla frowned a little bit as she felt locked in Alois' gaze.

○

Camilla and Prince Julian had first met about eleven years ago.

At the time, Camilla was only seven.

Their first meeting had been a complete coincidence. It had happened when Camilla was visiting the Royal Palace along with her parents.

From the beginning, Camilla had always been quick to anger and prone to losing her temper. She took umbrage with some minor trifle that day and ran away from her parents, deeper into the palace.

As she wandered the palace halls alone, Camilla eventually ran across Prince Julian. Back then, she had no idea that the boy was a Prince, so she had called out to him without any reservations.

Prince Julian had been all alone. As she looked at him, she was struck by that inherent beauty that seemed to come to him so naturally. But, she also thought he looked lost at the bottom of a well of loneliness.

So Camilla held out the biscuits she was holding onto, it was the first time she had made cookies like that in her life.

Then after a moment's hesitation, Prince Julian had taken one of those biscuits and eaten it.

He had told that young girl that the wonkily shaped and slightly burnt cookies she had made were delicious.

It was the first time that anyone had ever called her food she made 'delicious'.

○

"...Is that all?"

Alois blinked, looking at Camilla.

However, that was the end of her story.

In her mind, Camilla had told him exactly what he had asked for.

"That is all."

Camilla said. Startled slightly by how strongly she said those words, Alois' eyes widened a touch.

Those surprised eyes of his kept Camilla's gaze, Camilla meanwhile believed she was aware of just what he was so surprised about.

"What is it, do you have a problem?"

She was obviously irritated, her voice trembling ever so slightly as she tried to suppress it.

Camilla could feel her face turning red. Her hands were already clenched into fists as she glared at Alois, daring him to say a word.

Much to her chagrin, she could feel something in the corner of her eyes. The more she bit her lip, trying to bite back those feelings, the more frustrated she became.

Shame, anger, and a dull pain echoed through her chest. She regretted bringing it up at all. Those forlorn feelings of love that she couldn't ever toss aside swirled like a vicious storm inside of her.

Like this, Camilla had loved Prince Julian for over ten years.

What was wrong with that?

Up until now, Camilla had never told anyone about what happened that day. She hadn't told Therese, of course, but neither had she ever told her parents or her friends.

She knew that they would laugh at her for how much importance she placed on such a trifle, mocking her for how she felt. How can you love someone for such a silly reason? They would have sneered, making light of Camilla's feelings. But no matter how trivial or silly other people thought it was, Camilla still held it dear to her.

It's possible that some of the people around her might have heard her out and taken her feelings seriously. However, Camilla still feared to let people know.

Camilla didn't want to be laughed at for the most important moment of her life.

"No."

As Camilla glared at him with her eyes trembling slightly, Alois shook his head.

"I just felt a little jealous, that's all."

"Jealous, you say?"

Camilla furrowed her eyebrows skeptically at Alois, who nodded. His red eyes gleamed earnestly, not wavering at all as he looked at Camilla.

"If I was in his place, I would have said the same thing. That's why I was slightly jealous of His Highness for having met you back then."

Alois didn't laugh or make a fool out of her.

He said that with a calm and serious face, his voice ringing with an honest timbre.

56

“Oho? Seems like you’re in a good mood today.”

The very next day, that flirty voice once again called out to Camilla in the kitchen.

This was around the time when the cooks were either out buying produce or taking their breaks, so Camilla was surprised that there was anyone in the kitchen she had expected to be deserted.

“Something good happen?”

Turning to face the voice, she saw the man she had come to dislike since the previous day. He was laying down on a big wooden crate in the corner of the room. Perhaps he was taking a nap until she walked in?

“Nothing in particular. That said, looking at your face is ruining my mood.”

Although Camilla glared at him, Klaus only yawned in response. Raising himself off the box with a cat-like stretch, he ran a hand through his slightly dishevelled hair.

“Your mood swings sure are pretty intense, huh? But I’m sure you’ll be happy to see my face one day.”

With a tensionless grin on his lips, Klaus sat back down on the edge of the crate. Then, he looked at what Camilla was doing on the kitchen bench.

Arrayed in front of Camilla were onions, garlic and a jar of raspberry jam. For the last few days, Günter had run the junior cooks in the kitchen through a harsh regimen using these ingredients.

In her hand, Camilla held a knife. The oven had already been lit and a flame started underneath the frying pan. It was already obvious to him what she was intending to do.

“Did you even take part in that training at all? Won’t he get angry if you just up and use his ingredients without permission?”

Klaus laughed, his voice light and airy.

Camilla had a sense that he was making fun of her, but for now, she ignored his cajoling. With a derisive hmph, she scowled at Klaus.

“I’ve always been doing this, no one has ever brought it up.”

“That so? Pretty sure he’ll notice if our stocks begin to run out, though. Maybe the Head Chef won’t mind, but aunty is another story.”

Aunty... She hadn’t considered this man’s connection to Gerda until he said that.

The Head Maid, Gerda, was a member of the House of Lörrich. She had been openly hostile to Camilla since the very beginning. Judging her from those encounters alone, Gerda was a severe, stubborn, and also rather dark person. She seemed like the complete opposite of Klaus, who didn’t seem to care for anything much other than flirting.

But, Gerda was the elder sister of the current Baron Lörlich. And it only serves to reason that if Klaus was the eldest son of the current head, that would make Gerda his aunt.

“That one, she’d notice even if a single grain of salt was missing. She’d realize if someone was syphoning off food lickety-split.”

“But, no one has ever said anything?”

“Then, I guess she’s just decided to overlook it, huh?”

Camilla found herself getting angrier the more Klaus talked. Going by his logic, doesn’t that mean she was just being toyed with by Gerda?

– What does he mean, overlooked?

She was just a mere servant. Camilla’s position at the moment may be vague, but she definitely should still stand above Gerda at any rate. In fact, the only one who should have the authority to truly object to anything Camilla did in this house was Alois himself.

“I suppose I should be grateful, then. Now, watch in amazement, if you would.”

As if trying to get back at Klaus, Camilla kept glaring at him as she boldly declared that, puffing out her chest.

Although she did feel slightly guilty about using some of the winter provisions without permission, she would feel even worse if she let her cooking skills rust instead. Failure to keep one’s skills sharp had been the downfall of many an aspiring chef.

– In any case, I should show this man I’m not to be trifled with.

“...I see?”

Klaus said that with a sigh as he watched Camilla haughtily look down on him. Giving his hair another scratch, he stood up and sidled over to Camilla’s side.

Camilla, ignoring him, began to cut up the garlic and onions in silence. She wasn’t exactly comfortable with Klaus’ intimate audience, but she tried to focus on her work instead. It would be unsightly if she got angry with him now since she had told him to watch in the first place. That only made sense.

“Hey, you... Are you really planning on marrying Alois?”

“HAAA!?”

Suddenly hearing that word whispered in her ear, Camilla’s shoulders jumped with an angry shriek. She raised her head, accidentally catching Klaus’ eyes as she did.

“T-That... That still remains to be seen...!”

“That so? But you’re the one who made him lose weight, aren’t you?”

“I...”

– I wonder if that’s really the truth?

Camilla had put all her effort into making Alois lose weight. But after what happened in Grenze, Camilla didn't feel like she was the driving force behind it anymore. Even though Camilla pestered him less about his weight after that, Alois had taken charge of reducing his own diet and his weight dropped as a result.

Camilla had simply given Alois the first push. As things stood, could she truly say that she was the one making him lose weight?

As Camilla pondered that on the spot, lost in thought, Klaus had no idea what was going on inside her head. Looking at her knife hand that had stopped entirely, he crossed his arms and posed a question.

“Do you love that guy?”

“H-HAA!? Just where do you think you're going with this!?”

As Klaus chuckled that question her way without a second thought, Camilla raged. Just how far was his rudeness going to go?

“You know, you're a pretty easy girl to understand.”

As Camilla got redder by the second, Klaus instead stayed cool. That flirtatious face of his didn't change a whit even after crossing his arms, keeping his gaze firmly on Camilla's face.

“But, is it fine? Do you really know what's going on in that man's head?”

Yet despite that, his words were cold. Camilla felt as if that burning fire of her anger had been doused in cold water as her eyes widened, looking at Klaus.

“What?”

“That guy sure lost weight easily, didn't he?”

Looking at Camilla's serious eyes, Klaus smiled loosely.

“Don't you think it's weird? It's as if the moment he wanted it to happen, the weight just began to slide right off. But until now, he had always been a Toady Pig. Just what does that mean? Just why was he like that in the first place, I wonder?”

Camilla's eyes narrowed. To Camilla, his words sounded like they were trying to goad her into an answer that he wanted to hear, the same as when he had asked her ‘Do you really know what's going on inside that man's head?’.

And she couldn't stomach those disgusting intentions of his.

Those intentions surely being that he was trying to insult Alois.

“Because of the traditions of the Montchat family, right? That the head is to eat excessive amounts of luxurious food.”

“But it's just a tradition, not a law, right?”

In fact, Alois was already breaking from that tradition. The excessive amount of sugar and seasoning might not have disappeared, but the number of meals he took had decreased exponentially. What used

to be eight meals had been reduced to three, with a light snack during a tea party. He was still overweight, but the morbidly obese Alois had long gone.

So, it was true, that if he had the will to reduce what he was eating, then he could. Alois had never complained or pined for his old way of eating or asked for something like a day where he could go back to the way things were.

As Alois reduced the size of his meals, the senior servants seemed to baulk at the idea, but they couldn't go against the master of the house. In effect, it wouldn't have been difficult to break away from that tradition any time he wished.

– Yet.

“So, don't you think it's weird?”

As Klaus goaded her once again, Camilla glared, then slammed the knife she held hard down onto the onion in front of her. At the sudden violent movement, Klaus jumped.

“Breaking tradition is one thing, the hardest part is to change your own way of thinking, is it not!?”

“O-Okay.”

Klaus nodded, a little cowed. His head still bobbing up and down meekly, he stepped away from Camilla just a touch. It was as if he was afraid Camilla was going to turn that knife on him for what he was going to ask her next.

“You know, you really do love him, don't you?”

“That's wrong!”

Camilla denied it strongly, almost as if it were instinct. The blood had probably already gotten to her head at this point.

Thus, she said something she didn't need to say.

“Do not misunderstand me! The one I love will always, ALWAYS, be Prince Julian!”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

There was more than one voice of surprise.

Of the two voices she heard, one belonged to Klaus, standing next to her.

The other was a much deeper voice, belonging to a middle-aged man.

Turning her head to look, she knew the man who stood at the entrance to the kitchen.

The Head Chef of the kitchen stood with his mouth hanging agape in astonishment and his wide eyes full of hurt. It was Günter.

Standing outside the kitchen, Camilla found herself glaring at Klaus once again.

“I was kicked out because of you!”

“No... I don’t think that one was actually my fault.”

Klaus, who had been told to leave alongside Camilla, said that as he stretched out his back. Even though Günter, the head chef, had thrown them out, he didn’t seem to be acting like it was much of a big deal.

“The Head Chef Old Man really is way too serious and sensitive about everything. I guess that’s why he’s still single.”

“Rather, I think you’re the one who isn’t serious enough.”

Camilla spat that out bitterly, rubbing her forehead between her fingers.

Camilla’s sudden outburst had genuinely hurt Günter.

He looked truly shocked when he heard her yell out how she loved Prince Julian. That usually rugged and strict face of his stood with mouth agape as if he had been stunned out of his senses. Even that usually vibrant red hair of his somehow seemed to lose a bit of its lustre.

Rough as he made himself out to be, it seemed that his true feelings were actually delicate enough to match his cooking. Although it wasn’t about himself, he still felt upset hearing it, telling them both to ‘get out’ through an unusually weak voice.

‘It’s best you stay out of the kitchen for a while,’ he said specifically to Camilla as she left, making her feel all the more bitter.

The door that Camilla and Klaus had been kicked out through now stood firmly closed.

Inside, Günter was all alone. Was he crying or shouting curses? It was eerily quiet. With a final glance at the door, Camilla sighed.

Klaus looked surprised as he gazed at her.

“You actually care about that kind of thing, huh?”

“What do you mean by that?”

As Camilla snarled, Klaus’ eyes perked up a bit while flashing her his particular brand of smile which she had really come to hate.

“Oh, nothing... I just thought it was pretty cute.”

Camilla only frowned in reply, turning away from Klaus. She didn’t even try to hide her disdain, but Klaus didn’t seem to be daunted by it, calling out to Camilla again with the same voice.

“Do you really love Prince Julian? The man who abandoned you for the girl from the Ende family? Can you really still like a guy like that?”

“That is just how I am.”

“I see. Very interesting. Hmm~.”

Klaus made all sorts of agreeable sounds as Camilla raised her head to answer him, looking at that face of his.

That lean and handsome face of his, similar to Prince Julian’s, was twisted slightly into an ill-natured smirk. She saw something in those eyes she had dismissed as those of a frivolous playboy’s before, something like a predator eyeing its prey.

“You should forget about an awful man like that.”

Klaus words snaked into her ear, soft as honey. As he did, he laid his hand across his own chest. As much as Camilla was irritated to admit it, the way he quit his usual irreverent way of carrying himself and bowed as he spoke did look good.

“Such a man doesn’t befit you at all. I’m a much better man. Unlike him, I’m kind to girls, I’ve never made any lover of mine cry. I might not be a prince, but I am a genius. Along with me, you would never feel any discomfort for your entire life.”

It was a gentle voice that would tickle at any girl’s heart. Shameful as the words were, they were spoken with confident bravado. The look on his face straddled the line between telling a joke yet still looking serious. Pretentious as Klaus might seem, the dedication to follow through on what he wanted to do with unwavering seriousness was reminiscent of Prince Julian as well.

A man well aware of other’s gazes, yet also being well aware of just what thoughts lay behind those gazes. With such impeccable calculation, he had probably captured the hearts of many young girls in the past.

“Oh, lady of the raven black hair who I so yearn for Sehnsucht. I endear you to choose me. When it comes to His Highness Prince Julian, that guy can go and sc-”

But, Klaus is not Prince Julian.

“I am quite fine, thank you.”

Camilla cut Klaus’ words short and kept walking. Now that the kitchen was out, she thought about just returning to her room. From the beginning, she had never seen Klaus as a potential partner at all.

“Hey, wait a minute!”

After a brief moment of standing there stunned, Klaus chased after her quickly. Once he jogged to catch back up to Camilla, he walked by her side.

“I just don’t get it, y’know? Hey, at least throw me a bone here, do I really not have a chance?”

“My answer will always be no.”

Camilla didn’t stop her stride even once, still looking towards the front.

“In fact, are you even truly aware of your position? You are the heir to a barony. If you are constantly playing around like this, it will only hurt you in the future.”

Back in the capital, she definitely recalled stories of young lords and ladies giving over to their passions of romance, like moths to the flame.

Certainly, some of them still made good names for themselves. Even if they played around in their younger years, they would one day settle down with a partner of repute and leave the past behind them.

But, the number of those who instead tumbled into the abyss of profligacy far outweighed them. Such as the young noblewoman, pregnant with the child of some unknown man and cast out of her house. Or the noble's son who made one licentious remark too many and tread on the toes of one who could orchestrate his fall.

And these ruinous incidents never reflected well on the family name either. Becoming the kindling to be lit ablaze in the realm of gossip and rumour, the debt is never shouldered merely by the offender alone.

That was true of Camilla as well. If someone merely listened to the stories, she was a young noblewoman who completely lost her reason in pursuit of love, dragging her family name through the mud as she herself fell from grace.

“I’ll be fine.”

However, Camilla’s words of persuasion, spoken from experience, didn’t reach Klaus. He gave her a carefree smile, brushing a soft lock of his curly brown hair over his ear.

“I have no intention of carrying on my family name anyways. That ever-serious younger brother of mine can take over the house, if he wants.”

“You... Aren’t you the eldest son?”

“So what? Even my father seems determined to have my younger brother be the successor anyways, raising him up in the background. Besides, that kind of thing doesn’t suit me.”

Camilla inadvertently came to a halt. Looking to the side, she stared at Klaus in a way she hadn’t before.

As she did, Klaus just tilted his head as if nothing was wrong.

“What’s wrong? Oh, are you finally interested?”

Camilla herself didn’t really know why she had suddenly come to a stop.

– It’s just that, somehow...

Those eyes that oozed playfulness, the same colour as his hair. They were the eyes of a playboy who never took anything seriously.

“Do you truly think that you can act like this forever?”

Looking away from Klaus, Camilla snapped that at him with a curt and severe voice. Then, she walked away, slightly faster this time in the hopes that Klaus wouldn't try to reach her again.

Behind Camilla, Klaus merely shrugged his shoulders.

– Somehow...

Leaving Klaus behind, she was alone. On her way back to her room, Camilla frowned.

She had thought that the way he looked and moved reminded her of Prince Julian.

But more than anything else, wasn't he a similar person to Alois?

– Such a thing shouldn't be possible. Alois isn't a frivolous man like that.

Trying to drive those thoughts out of her head, Camilla angrily stamped down hard on the floorboards with her heel.

58

The head of the Lörriich family, Rudolph Lörriich, had two sons.

One was the prodigal son, Klaus.

He was twenty years old, a raucous playboy that Rudolph always found difficult to rein in. Always out in the town playing around and chasing skirts, sometimes not coming home for days at a time. Abandoning the studies he was expected to take up as a noble, he instead indulged in practices frowned upon by the deeply traditionalist Mohnton territory, such as poetry and music. Constantly and irritatingly arrogant, he was always disdainful of people who stood at a higher station than him. It was as if he made a sport in mocking and treating high ranking nobles and others older than him flippantly, always earning their ire.

No matter how much Rudolph reprimanded him, he would never pay any attention, only further fuelling his father's indignation. Two years ago, it was finally decided that his disrespectful and irresponsible behavior could no longer be tolerated, so he was kicked out of his family home. As he made to leave Mohnton entirely for new pastures, he was eagerly stopped by Alois before he could reach the border and was convinced to work for him.

The second son was a very serious and studious young man named Franz.

Franz, a year younger than Klaus, was almost his exact opposite. He was honest and hard-working, always carrying himself with pride and dignity as a noble. He had a deep respect for his elders, honoured the old histories and traditions of the land, and his conduct resembled a true leader of the future.

He never hesitated to make decisions, even if they were hard ones, always valuing the good of the many over the benefit of the few. He had earned a deep sense of trust from the rest of his family and was seen as an ideal candidate to inherit the position of the family head when the time came.

In fact, Rudolph himself wished to name Franz as his successor. He may be slightly willful and overconfident of his own abilities, but he was far more capable than Klaus and exceptionally easier to manage as well.

However, Franz has not yet been named as the successor to the Lörriich family.

That is because Rudolph's older sister, Gerda, strongly objects.

○

A few days after the two of them were expelled from the kitchen.

With things as they were, it would be hard to practice cooking. In Mohnton, a land with little in the way of entertainment, Camilla was struggling to find ways to pass the time.

Sitting in that dim room of hers was bad for her health and talking with Nicole wasn't nearly enough to properly occupy her. The only other thing she could do was learn more about the territory of Mohnton from Alois' study sessions.

Thanks to that, Camilla had become familiar with the circumstances of the Lörriich family these past few days. Specifically, the situation around the two brothers and the matter of succession. It had become quite a popular source of gossip, apparently. Alois did his best to lay out the matter in an objective way, but it was obvious that he favoured Klaus with the way he talked.

Camilla herself didn't really understand just why Alois took Klaus' side so much. From Camilla's point of view, Klaus was lazy and irresponsible, not to mention utterly disrespectful.

No matter how much he said he didn't care for them, everything he did reflected back on his family's name. So whenever he played around and made a fool of himself, it would drag the honour of his house and its vassals through the mud. Not to mention Alois, who always had to cover for him.

Not that Camilla was really one to talk when it came to shaming a family name.

– No, no, just why am I even thinking about that man!?

After finishing her study session with Alois, she returned to her room. Camilla found it hard to rid herself of what she had just learned about the House of Lörriich from Alois, shaking her head furiously.

– In the first place, just why am I going along with all this studying!? I haven't even decided on marriage yet!

She didn't have any desire to even think about marriage until Alois was a man she could stomach to kiss. Even if he had slimmed down somewhat, he was still larger than the average person by quite some degree. All that useless fat of his must be chiseled into muscle.

– At any rate, I need to get him exercising.

Despite having spent over seven months in Mohnton, Camilla had never seen Alois run or train as any sort of exercise. When he was in a panic or an emergency, Alois did sometimes run. But from what she could see, he was winded almost immediately by the effort. Thinking back, she had never seen him on horseback either. That said, the reason for that might be that there wasn't any horse that could support his weight.

Needless to say, Alois was completely unfit. When she saw just how passionately his eyes lit up when he was busy lecturing Camilla about the history of some house or town, a good part of her wished that he would devote that drive to getting outdoors every now and then.

Camilla could only think that it was such a shame. If only he'd swing his sword around a little bit, it would be good exercise... No, would he even be able to practice with a sword as he is right now?

– Next time we talk, I should invite him to take a walk with me.

If he can't even keep up a run for a few seconds without losing his breath, she probably couldn't expect much out of his physical stamina, so the best thing would be to start with simple walking.

That way, eventually she could tighten up that body of his. Taking her time, slowly but surely.

And with that, the decision of marriage could be put off.

"I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. I don't care about the succession."

It was the voice of a clearly irritated man that broke Camilla's line of thought.

"I'm leaving all of that to my little brother. He wants to inherit anyways, so there's no point in me getting in the way."

"We cannot afford to let an incompetent inherit the House of Lörriich."

As soon as she heard that cold voice, Camilla instinctively hid behind a corner.

One of the halls of the Montchat manor. There weren't many people around. Yet standing imposingly in the middle of the hallway were Gerda and Klaus, talking face to face.

The two of them were merely servants. Whereas Camilla was their master's... for now, a guest. She was irritated that her first instinct was to stay hidden, but both of these people truly were hard to deal with for vastly different reasons, and the two of them in one place spelled trouble.

As she stuck close to the corner, trying to keep herself in the shadows, a scullery maid that passed by looked at her suspiciously.

Camilla realized just how suspicious she must look to any passer-by. She could have just taken another path to get back to her room, but the idea of being forced into doing that was annoying in of itself.

Since she was standing like this now, she decided that she would at least listen to what was going on.

Seemingly not noticing Camilla's presence, Gerda and Klaus continued their serious looking discussion.

"Incompetent? Aunty, don't you just hate him because he doesn't listen to you? That guy is different from father, he actually has self-confidence."

Klaus kept up that frivolous attitude as per usual, but there was a definite undercurrent of displeasure in his tone of voice. On the other hand, Camilla could only see Gerda's back from where she was peeking. But, that taut back and cold voice seemed like the usual Gerda to her.

"But even if I succeed for some unknown reason, it's not like I'd listen to you either, aunty. I would liven up that dull town and have parties in the street every day."

"Even if you never listened to me, I have no doubt you would do the job well."

"Well, thank you for that."

Klaus laughed jokingly, but he didn't seem to be happy at all.

Then, trying to put a full stop on the conversation, Klaus tried to slip past Gerda.

As he did, she spoke quietly, her voice devoid of emotion.

"In Blume, Franz is reportedly building up a force in secret."

"Huh?"

"He's an ambitious person, so he has decided to make his move. He intends to rule Blume with an iron fist. Apparently, he's extorting young people and pressing them into his service, as well as rounding up anyone who goes against him and keeping them captive. The rumours haven't leaked out yet, but that's

likely due to the influence of the Lörriich. If they possess any wisdom at all, they would keep this story secret.”

Klaus stopped in his tracks, looking back at Gerda. Gerda’s voice may have sounded as cold as usual, but as she spoke more and more it was possible to hear a vein of feeling running through it.

“He intends to turn Blume into his own personal treasury. He’s already begun to eye the profits from the manastone towns enviously and wants to convert Blume into such a place.”

“...That town, it isn’t fit for something like that.”

“And because he does not know it, that is why he is incompetent.”

Their conversation really was very serious. Aren’t they worried about being overheard?

Despite Camilla thinking that, although neither Gerda nor Klaus raised their voices, they didn’t seem to have any issue with being seen talking either. In fact, some busy looking servants had passed right by them during their conversation.

– Perhaps she isn’t concerned about rumours being spread?

Of course, she wasn’t concerned. If her goal was to keep Klaus in place as the successor, she ought to be protesting as loudly as possible. Having a few more servants spread helpful rumours could only help her in that.

Not to mention, despite how hostile she was to Camilla, she was utterly upright. Considering how rock solid her position in the Montchat household seemed, she had little reason to be concerned.

“Well, y’know, I am a genius, so... I really don’t think it’ll turn out the way you think it will, aunty. If you don’t get that, there are going to be some problems.”

“That doesn’t matter. All I care about is aiding the Lörriich family however I can... Although the opposing party is troublesome to deal with, certainly.”

Gerda sighed. Then, for a moment, keeping her back straight, she turned away from Klaus.

Her eyes were gloomy and without much life, yet somehow filled with a quiet determination, as she glanced towards the corner where Camilla was peeking out from. She didn’t glare at her like before, but Camilla still felt her heart rate double.

“Incompetence is truly unforgivable, all the same.”

As if declaring that was truly the end of the conversation, Gerda turned back to Klaus. Then, she continued back down the corridor without even offering him a farewell.

Klaus, now alone, simply shrugged as he watched Gerda walk away. With a final, quick glance, he went down the hallway in the opposite direction to where Gerda left.

In other words, right towards Camilla.

“...What’re you doing?”

Right in front of the corner. As he came across Camilla, who missed her opportunity to escape, he muttered in amazement.

A bad situation somehow got even more awkward.

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It seemed that the issue of the Lörriich succession had only gotten more serious.

As they advanced deeper into the winter season, the air outside was so cold that it began to prick the skin. Whilst they walked through the courtyard that was covered in a thin veneer of snow, Camilla heard about it from Alois.

“Lord Alois, straighten out your back!”

Camilla slapped the small of Alois’ back with her hand. That smacking sound echoed through the deserted garden beside them. Alois, as if startled by the sudden sound, quickly stretched out his back that was hunched over just a second ago.

“Y-Yes... So, as I was saying, I’m not quite sure what to do about Rudolph, it’s causing me no end of grief.”

“Raise your head! Eyed forward! Make sure to always look proud!”

“Yes! You know... I thought taking a stroll would be a little more relaxing than this.”

Alois mumbled in confusion, though that was only natural.

Resolving to have him exercise in one way or another, Camilla invited Alois to start taking winter strolls with her a few days ago. Alois agreed, and the two of them had walked together instead of their usual afternoon tea ever since.

However, it seemed like the two of them had very different ideas of what a ‘stroll’ was. She watched every step Alois took like a hawk, admonishing him for stepping out of line even once. It was walking in name only, to Camilla this was actually in effect practice for his social debut.

– When he straightens out his back and tightens his hips, he doesn’t leave too bad of an impression to any onlooker.

Camilla wasn’t satisfied with simply slimming Alois down alone. Camilla herself may have some trouble seeing it as vividly as before, but her goal from the beginning had been to take him back to the capital with her and flaunt his newly acquired good looks.

There is no well-respected aristocrat in the world who walks around with a hunched back. He had to carry himself with pride, every step he took elegant and graceful.

“Lord Alois, your shoulders are sagging! Keep them up!”

“Yes... Like this, then?”

Although Camilla’s instructing was strict, Alois didn’t seem to mind that much. He honestly took Camilla’s advice, doing his best to adjust himself straight away.

Perhaps that’s as to be expected of a duke? He’s very quick to learn. Or perhaps he had learned all this in the past, and his once good posture had been ruined by becoming overweight? Nobles were usually taught how to carry themselves from an early age, after all.

If she could get him to at least walk up-right, then that would be a great leap forward to shaping him up as a proper man. He wouldn't be an embarrassment to be seen alongside either...

As she imagined standing side by side with Alois in the royal palace, Camilla's eyes dipped to the floor. The thought of haughtily lauding it over the frustrated faces of Liselotte and Therese were suddenly pushed to the corners of her mind, replaced instead with an emotion that she had never felt until coming here.

It was like a dark fog, spreading from her chest all the way to her head. Whenever Alois made serious attempts to change, Camilla felt this unfamiliar sensation seeping through her. Just what was this awful feeling...?

"Camilla, are you alright?"

"Ah... I-It's nothing."

Alois looked to his side in worry, suddenly not feeling Camilla's hawk-like eyes on him anymore. As he gazed at her, Camilla raised her eyes and shook her head.

Then, looking at Alois, she spoke as if to try and take her mind out of her thoughts.

"Ah... Lord Alois, your stride is much too small! It makes you look weak!"

"Ahh, this is..."

Unlike how he usually was, Alois didn't suddenly snap to attention at Camilla's instruction. This time he was the one whose eyes dropped to the floor, with a bit of an embarrassed smile.

"That's because I'm walking with Camilla."

"...Excuse me?"

As Camilla looked at him in confusion, Alois scratched the side of his cheek bashfully.

"If I don't at least do this, we wouldn't be able to walk beside each other."

As Alois said that, Camilla looked down at her own feet.

Covered up by her dress were Camilla's slender legs and difficult to walk in heels. Beside her were Alois' huge feet. Right now, he was making small steps, hardly proportionate to his size.

Camilla blinked. If she thought about it calmly, it was obvious. Their walking speed wouldn't be the same.

– He was just walking slowly for my sake.

"...Guh."

That dark and foggy feeling welled up so deeply that Camilla groaned. 'What's wrong?' Alois said with concern on his face.

– Uuuuu... Even though he was just a toad...!

Gritting her teeth, Camilla glared at Alois.

So frustrating. It was frustrating that it actually made her a little happy to realize that. But more than anything else, it was painful.

– Why?

As Alois and Camilla kept walking side by side, he kept his pace slow and deliberate. Their conversations drifted from Blume to keeping his knees from wobbling, then back to the Lörriich family issues. But, Camilla wasn't really paying much attention.

– I never wanted to come to a place like this at all in the first place.

What she wanted to do was return to the capital. She wanted to look down on all the people who had mocked and scorned her. That was the reason she had decided to shape Alois into an ideal man.

– I love Prince Julian.

She had never truly desired to marry Alois from the beginning. She had tried to slim Alois down, but it had never been for his sake. In the beginning, Alois had treated her as if she was some kind of pitiful burden, and she had felt nothing for him.

But now, that felt wrong.

Whenever Camilla saw Alois trying to change for her sake, she felt it. The name of that dark emotion that swirled through her... That was probably guilt.

“Camilla, is that fine with you?”

“Eh!? Ah, yes! ... Yes?”

As Alois asked her that, Camilla answered reflexively. But she had no idea what she was actually saying ‘yes’ to. As Camilla looked doubtful, probably trying to figure out just what she had agreed to, Alois sighed.

“I was talking about visiting Blume. Because of the issues with the Lörriich family lately, I thought it would be good to visit Rudolph personally. That being the case, I was hoping that you could accompany me, Camilla.”

“Wait, me? Would that be alright?”

When she had demanded to go to Einst, he had been reluctant, so what caused this sudden change of heart? As she looked at him, Alois seemed to falter just a little bit.

“...Camilla, I think it would be good for you to see the rest of Mohnton's major towns. Even though you've been here for over half a year, you've only visited Einst and Grenze in that time.”

“Right...”

Certainly, Camilla might be seen as a bit withdrawn for not having travelled much at all in the better part of a year. She was, after all, in-effect a marriage candidate for the highest lord in the Duchy. Usually, in Camilla's position, she would be travelling around the land, greeting the nobility and letting the people see her face.

“Officially the reason for my visit is to offer New Year’s greetings, so we will be staying in Blume until the beginning of Spring. It might be a slightly longer stay, but I hope during that time you will get to know the people of Blume. It will also be a good opportunity to meet the members of the Lörriich family as well.”

It seemed that Alois was finally interested in having Camilla fulfil that role.

– So suddenly? Just why...

No, she can’t say she didn’t know. There was only one possible meaning behind this.

“Next year, at the end of Spring, I will be turning twenty-four. By that time, I’ll strive to have your ideal figure, Camilla.”

She hadn’t noticed, but Alois had come to a stop. Standing slightly in front of her, it was as if he was blocking Camilla’s path.

His back was stretched straight. As he kept her in his gaze, he stood with dignity.

That silver hair of his that fluttered in the wind reminded her slightly of Prince Julian’s.

Yet although those eyes of theirs were the same red colour, they weren’t similar at all.

“Next year...when Spring comes, will you formally become my fiancée?”



「来年の春、私は二十四になります。
そのころまでには、カミラさんの理想の姿に
なれるように、努力します」

「年が明けたら、春になったら、
今度は正式に、
私と婚約をしていただけませんか」

アロイス・モンテナト

モートン領を治める公爵

Camilla's breath caught in her throat as she blinked.

No matter how furiously she thought, she couldn't find an answer.

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The carriage which Camilla rode on trundled through the snow-covered road on its way towards Blume.

As she looked out the window, the fields of snow continued far off into the horizon. Over the rolling hills and deadened trees, the snow even collected on the top of frozen rivers.

Yet even this was less snow than one would apparently see further north. The west of Mohnton, where Blume was located, was said to have one of the mildest climates in the territory. The winters weren't too freezing and the summers weren't too oppressive, not to mention that the miasma was also a lot less of a problem here. There weren't as many swamps dense with miasma, instead, there were a lot of forests with normal wildlife. It was one of the few lands in Mohnton actually containing some expanse of agriculture as well.

However, at this time of year, the fields were dead of course. It was still quite some time before things would grow again, come Spring.

As she watched the endless fields of snow roll past the window, Camilla sighed.

"You don't look well, are you okay?"

Nicole, who was sitting opposite her in the carriage, asked her worriedly. Even though she asked, she didn't wait for Camilla's reply as she began to try and pull a blanket out of the luggage she had beside her.

"Ahh, no, I am fine. The trip merely wore me out a little, that's all."

The ride from Mohnton's capital to Blume usually took half a day by carriage. However, the roads were slick with snow at the moment. As the journey took longer than it typically would, it would be even more tiring for people who weren't used to traveling such long distances without rest.

They had left the previous day. After spending two-days traveling by carriage, Blume was finally nearby. It only made sense that she would feel fatigued after such a long period of traveling.

But, Nicole seemed to be suspicious all the same.

"Is that really all? When we spent the previous night at the inn, you didn't want to leave your room at all and you didn't look well..."

"...Is that so?"

Camilla tried to avoid the conversation as her eyes drifted back to the window. She didn't want to meet Nicole's painfully earnest gaze right now.

"It is so. Because when we usually go somewhere new, you're always the first person to want to look around, Mistress-"

"Do not call me that!"

Both Nicole and Camilla were surprised by that sudden shout. As Nicole's eyes widened in shock, Camilla quickly pressed a hand over her mouth.

Up until now, Nicole had always been in the habit of calling Camilla 'Mistress'. At first, Camilla had done her best to rebuke her for it, but eventually it became a fruitless chore so she pulled her up on it less and less.

Lately, she had gotten used to it and just let Nicole call her how she pleased.

Though it had been quite some time since she had snapped at her for using that word, it had somehow come out of her mouth surprisingly harsh. Nicole blinked in surprise a couple of times, but when she spoke again, her face was even more earnest than before.

"But really, it sure was strange... When you told me that I would be coming to Blume with you. 'Come with me, do not leave my side even for an instant', you said to me. Even though I thought you were supposed to be riding in Lord Alois' carriage."

That's right. In fact, Camilla was supposed to ride in the Duke's carriage alongside Alois. As a result of refusing that, Camilla took the secondary carriage with Nicole, whilst Alois now had to travel in the Duke's carriage sandwiched with all his male attendants. She felt bad just thinking about it.

By the way, the Head Chef Günter was amongst Alois' retainers this time. Apparently he was brought along due to him being Klaus' direct boss. After being provoked by Klaus' words and blurting out that she 'loved Prince Julian', Camilla had been inadvertently avoiding meeting him.

"Well, that's because you are my only maid, after all."

Camilla frowned slightly at Nicole, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"What's more, how do I put this, it would have been uncomfortable... being alone. I wanted somebody to stay by my side."

Camilla's voice trailed off into a murmur. That last sentence could barely be heard over the shaking of the carriage underneath them. Far from being convinced, Nicole only looked more and more anxious.

"You really are different from usual today, Mistress."

Camilla bit her lip and averted her eyes. As Camilla's only maid, they had spent several months close together now. Nicole was easily the person who saw Camilla the most often.

If Nicole was impertinent and pushy like this before, the usual Camilla wouldn't have stood for it and would definitely have snapped back. But right now, she felt like she couldn't say a thing since the maid's words were the truth.

– But even so, what should I do?

'Become my fiancée?' When Alois had asked that of her, Camilla couldn't give him an answer. After that, seeing how Camilla was rooted to the spot in silence, Alois had told her that she 'didn't need to make a decision right away'.

But if not then, just when should she reply? How could she talk to Alois now without having answered him?

And above all else...just how was she to respond?

This was the matter that Camilla was most uncertain of.

That said, she couldn't afford to keep dallying forever. Sometime soon, she would have to make a decision. That dark fog creeping through her would only get worse if she kept Alois waiting on tenterhooks without an answer for too long.

In the past, Camilla had once called Alois 'insincere'. Camilla now felt those words were more suited for herself.

Because...Camilla felt like she was being terribly dishonest with Alois right now.

Just spinning her wheels and avoiding the man himself wasn't going to solve anything, Camilla knew that more than anyone.

But it was as if her body would just inadvertently do everything to avoid him, while her mind and heart kept spinning around in a blur.

Guilt towards Alois. Love towards Julian. Camilla's own passions...and regrets. Revenge. Envy. Other feelings buried deep within her heart. Countless emotions that she couldn't keep control of clouded and confused her thoughts.

Around and around they spun.

She felt dizzy.

The wheels of the carriage moved off the sludgy snow that covered the road before and onto stone pavement.

With the sudden change in vibration, Camilla looked out the window.

Sloped grey roofs sat atop whitewashed walls. The houses that lined the street looked like a layer of snow beneath a veneer of ash.

Although the houses seemed to have a simple design, on closer inspection they were actually quite elegantly made. The white and grey only served to accentuate the beautiful designs of the stained glass windows. Certain bricks in the house's construction were left unpainted, providing a certain playful aesthetic. Even though all the houses were similar, taken as a whole, they were an excellent display of good taste.

Perhaps even the snow and ice on the roof was a considered part of the vista? The icicles that dripped from the roof beautifully fit the atmosphere.

It was like a deliberate mix between the serious Einst and the vibrant Grenze. A town that looked prim and proper with a subtle sense of fun energy.

This was the town known for its flowers and perfumes run by the Lörlich family – Blume.

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The Lörrieh mansion could be found on a hill in the centre of Blume. The upper floors of the mansion overlooked the streets and buildings of Blume, as well as the trees that lined many of its streets. Further, in the distance, it was possible to spot the large gardens from which the flowers that fueled part of Blume's signature industry bloomed.

However, right now it was winter. The trees were bare of leaves and the gardens were covered in snow. The same was true for the gardens and greenhouses on the Lörrieh family's own estate, where the land was cold and withered.

The once flowering town of Blume had now given way to the season's chill. The town nestled into a quiet sort of hibernation, waiting for the first days of spring to return.

○

Camilla glumly looked out the window of a second-floor guest room. The sky was overcast with a heavily dour shade of grey, with the snowfall showing no sign of stopping.

As she watched the snow, Nicole was busy making a fuss as she unpacked the luggage. As she glimpsed Nicole working out of the corner of her eye, she could see that she was being as clumsy as ever. Usually, she would just snap at her saying 'Just let me do it!' and take over the work, but right now Camilla lacked that sort of fire.

The cause of that might have been the introductions with the Lörrieh family, which took place right after they had arrived.

Just remembering that meeting made Camilla rub her temples slightly and although she hadn't meant to, a sigh escaped her lips.

The House of Lörrieh, that both Gerda and Klaus belonged to, was a complicated family.

She had barely arrived before being introduced to Baron and the close members of his family.

There was Rudolph and his wife. They had two sons, the eldest Klaus and the second son Franz. Rudolph had two elder siblings as well, his older sister, Gerda and his older brother, Lucas.

Even though there were only six people she had to either meet for the first time or exchange pleasantries with, Camilla felt exhausted by it all.

– Perhaps it was just because of Gerda that the mood was so...

As the issue of succession became worse, Gerda took leave to return to the Lörrieh family home in Blume. Although Alois himself had travelled to Blume in order to nip a potential crisis in the bud before it started, it seemed that she was determined to be involved personally. The amount of work left in the wake of Gerda's absence to be picked up by Vilmer and the other senior servants must reach dizzying heights.

However, Gerda's sole focus right now seemed to be securing the succession of the prodigal son, Klaus.

Camilla frowned, her eyebrows wrinkling. Just remembering it was vexing.

– I know it's just going to make everything more complicated.

Klaus was just far too much of a flirt and a gadabout. Even as she was greeting the other members of his family, in front of Alois of all people, that man had tried to chat her up.

When Lucas flew into a rage at him for it, Klaus didn't seem to care at all. Franz looked disgusted with his brother, causing Gerda to look disgustedly at him in turn, all the while Rudolph looked utterly helpless. All Alois could do in the meantime was grimace awkwardly.

– The family head really is not playing his role properly, either.

Instead, it seemed like true power resided with his older siblings Lucas and Gerda. To put it simply, Franz and Klaus are their respective pawns in a proxy war for dominance between them. Rudolph, who couldn't seem to stand up to his siblings, didn't have the influence to settle matters properly.

– I wonder just how long things have been this bad?

Whilst the usually open hostility Camilla received was the main source of discomfort in Mohnton, there was something else bothering her here.

No matter how much she raised her voice, this didn't seem like something she could solve. A complex situation like this, where the lines between good and evil were blurred and hard to grasp, was something Camilla would struggle with.

○

Once Nicole had finally finished unpacking, Alois came to Camilla's room.

“Camilla, why not take a look through the town?”

Alois said, occupying the frame of the door. He seemed to be suggesting he didn't have any inclination to sit down and chat. Perhaps he wanted to go out straight away? He seemed to have changed clothes already.

“Blume really does have a different atmosphere compared to the other towns. This could take the place of our usual walks, don't you think?”

“Ah...”

Camilla avoided his gaze as she looked for the words to respond. The idea of a walk through town did sound good to her. Touring a place she had never been to before, that did sound like a good way to lift her mood as the mansion felt suffocating at the moment.

But, she couldn't just answer him straight away. If she walked alone with Alois, there was no way she would be able to keep her mind off it, after all.

The engagement...it has plagued Camilla's thoughts for days.

Alois, as if sensing what Camilla was thinking, spoke sympathetically.

“Don't worry, I asked Klaus to serve as a guide. He probably wants to get a breath of fresh air as well.”

“Klaus?”

Camilla finally spoke up, though unintentionally. Wouldn't there be all sorts of problems because of that? He's the one at the centre of this entire debacle, after all.

If Alois showed particular favour to one side or another, wouldn't that only hurt his position? What's more, Camilla had very little desire to go anywhere with Klaus in the first place.

Camilla realized that she had a hard time even being in the same room as Klaus.

She couldn't stand his flirting and disrespect, but there was more to it than that. There was just something in the way that he walked and talked that was eerily reminiscent of Prince Julian. Even if they didn't truly look alike and they certainly acted differently, there were fleeting moments where there was a glint in his eye or just a slight gesture that brought her back to those days in the capital.

– I want to go outside. There really isn't any reason to refuse him... But...

As Camilla pondered on the spot, her face furrowed with anxiety, a voice of salvation suddenly poured forth from behind her.

“Mistress, are you heading out? In that case, please take your shawl, it's very cold outside.”

Nicole.

As if by reflex, Camilla spun around on the spot and grabbed Nicole hard by the shoulders as the maid was holding out a shawl. She was saved.

“Nicole! Can we take Nicole with us!?”

“Ehh?”

Nicole sounded completely confused in her surprise, but right now, Camilla needed her to be a saviour.

“You've finished unpacking, haven't you? You should get changed now as well. Lord Alois, I trust this is fine?”

“I don't mind. The more the merrier, after all.”

When Alois agreed, Camilla breathed a sigh of relief. She thanked him with a wry smile, trying to mask her clashing feelings of insecurity and respite.

The smile that Alois returned to Camilla was far from comfortable either. But even if both of them were aware of just how awkward the other was, neither Alois nor Camilla really knew what to do about it.

Nicole, meanwhile, found it all baffling as she glanced at both Camilla and Alois.

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To understand just why Camilla and the others, who had merely set out for a stroll through the streets yet were now looking for a way into the town's underground, there is some explaining to do.

○

Snow fell silently from the overcast sky that afternoon, as a hymnal song faintly echoed through the town from somewhere in the distance.

The narrow, cobbled streets on the outskirts of town saw little traffic compared to the main boulevards. The walls of the houses looked aged while the shop signs and awnings had faded with time. A manastone lamp flickered in its stand, the glass protecting it broken.

The Lörrieh family had eyes all over Blume, but they would have to strain their eyes to see this far. In front of a small and rundown diner in this poorer suburb were Alois, Camilla, Nicole, and Klaus, as well as the four men that accompanied the latter.

“Jeeeeeze! How could you bring my Mistress to such a place!?”

Nicole yelled loudly outside the store, not holding back her complaints.

“Now now, calm down, little girl. There's no need to get so upset.”

“Don't call me a little girl!”

Nicole turned angrily on Klaus, but he didn't pay her any mind, continuing to look at the diner with that ever-composed face.

The double doors that led inside lay open, the hinges on both sides having been roughly broken off. There wasn't a single light coming from inside the store, only the meagre illumination from outside dispelling pitch darkness.

The counter propped up opposite to the entrance was covered in a thick layer of dust, whilst the decayed and peeling tables and chairs were pushed haphazardly into the corner, revealing worn floorboards that often gave way to dangerous looking gaps. Behind the counter, there was a door that led back to a kitchen. Right next to the entrance was a second door, that probably led to the owner's residence of sorts.

Klaus, leaving the other three standing outside the entrance, walked inside as if he owned the place. As he began to look around curiously, Camilla glared at Klaus, who seemed to be enjoying himself.

“You look as if you're amused?”

“Having an adventure like this is every boy's dream, y'know?”

“Adventure, hmm...? Are you really a nobleman's son? You really do leave a lot of room for doubt.”

Was he carefree or just careless? It was hardly befitting a proper nobleman's son to enter such a dangerous looking place without a proper escort.

"What's more, when it comes to the people of this town... You seem awfully close."

Saying that, Camilla reflected on what had happened when Klaus had guided them through the town.

At first, it was just a straightforward tour, with Klaus earnestly showing Camilla and the others the sights: the main boulevards of Blume, the rows of neat looking shops, and the trees that lined the streets that would be adorned with all sorts of colour flowers once spring bloomed into life.

But of course, the town was still in the depths of winter. The only thing adorning those withered looking trees were sheets of snow, and those streets that would be filled with people in the more amiable months were near deserted.

Yet whenever they did come across anyone, they all seemed to know Klaus without exception, as an acquaintance at very least.

From an eccentrically dressed and spoken scholar with books under his arm to a passionate and motherly woman who spoke with loud mirth. From a group of children to a panhandling old man. They all called out to Klaus and he called back to them like greeting an old friend.

However, if they were just familiar, Camilla wouldn't have bothered bringing it up. After all, despite the difference in social status, Alois had also been acquainted with the orphans of Grenze. Even Camilla herself became familiar with orphans and the people of the capital back when she slipped out of the manor with her maid, disguised as a commoner.

But, there was something different about how Klaus spoke with them, compared to Camilla and Alois. Of course, part of it was just how wide a variety of people he happened to be acquainted with, but also...

"Those people in town, you called them all 'teacher'. What exactly are you to these people?"

As he met people in the town, he would always call out to them as 'teacher' or 'teach'. It didn't matter if they were an adult, a child, or a homeless person on the sidewalk. Camilla couldn't help but find it strange that he would address people from all walks of life with basically the same title.

"Hmm... A student?"

As he looked over the counter, Klaus answered her casually. Klaus didn't hesitate in answering her, nor did he seem to mind when it came to rummaging through an abandoned property. He didn't seem worried about what he might find or anything like that at all.

"What do you mean by *student*...?"

"That first guy we met is a playwright, so he taught me how to write dramas. The aunty we met after that taught me a few things about dancing. Those mischievous little brats taught me a few street tricks Oh, and the old man is my poetry teacher, he's amazing at composition."

"Aren't all of those taboo!?"

Camilla was startled by what Klaus had said. After all, everything he just spoke of was frowned upon greatly in Mohnton. Theatre plays were unheard of here and it goes without saying that balls for the nobility weren't held either. Children were expected to behave properly and mischief was heavily punished. And the only songs and poems that were acceptable in Mohnton were lullabies and hymns that praised the royal family.

The only worldly pleasure that didn't seem to be frowned upon was indulging in the best food one could get their hands on. The customs and traditions of this land were still heavily rooted in a sense of atonement and modesty, in the way their ancestors had repented for the crimes that sent them here in the first place.

Of course, Camilla didn't think such a severe environment was good at all. However, Camilla could only think that way because she was, in effect, a foreigner in these lands. For people who were born and raised here, she assumed they would only think of it as the natural order of things.

"No matter how much you try and forbid people from doing things, you can't control their hearts."

Saying that, Klaus raised a finger to his lips and winked at her like a tease.

"That said, this needs to be our little secret. If it were found out, my teachers might get in trouble, y'know?"

"I was never going to say anything in the first place... Since I had people like that too."

Camilla, who had sneaked out of the house plenty of times to cook at an orphanage in defiance of her parents, had no reason to report Klaus' teachers either.

Camilla didn't think they were doing anything particularly wrong in the first place. Unlike Camilla's secret cookery classes, things such as dancing, poetry, and singing were well thought of back in the capital. A proper noble was expected to have extensive knowledge of the performing arts, including the theatricals, musical composition, as well as the classics.

Camilla knew that Alois wasn't such a narrow-minded man as to get angry about something like that either. He wouldn't take issue with it, nor seek to uncover it.

Although, that leaves out one person...

"Aren't you bothering my Mistress and Lord Alois!?"

Nicole wasn't satisfied at all. Just like the lady she served, it seemed like Nicole and Klaus were incompatible. Nicole was a serious girl, whilst Klaus was a carefree man. They were like water and oil.

"Because of what that *teacher* of yours said, my Mistress had to come to an awful place like this!"

As Nicole squared her shoulders and shouted angrily at him, Klaus merely smiled with narrowed eyes. That lackadaisical manner only ticked Nicole off even more.

"Why should my Mistress have to get involved with dealing with some noises underground!? Aren't you the one who was asked to solve it!?"

And so, we finally arrived at the reason.

○

The cause of all this was a rumour the vagrant old man had told them, about strange noises coming from under the surface.

In the northside of Blume, the people living in the poor slums and alleyways were hearing strange noises below their feet.

It was a rumour that had been spreading like wildfire between the townsfolk as of late.

There wasn't any rhyme or reason behind the sounds as they bubbled up to the surface at all times of day and night. The sounds were muffled and difficult to make out, as if they were travelling from the very depths of the earth. Sometimes it was something like a wall suddenly being hit hard with a hammer or the unbearable sound of a metal nail being scraped down a sheet of iron. Other times, even more unsettlingly, a high pitched screech that sounded almost like a person's scream. No one could figure out just what the cause or nature of these sounds was. All they knew is that they wanted those horrible echoes from the abyss to stop.

The gossip making rounds about had begun to grow outlandish, such as it all being caused by a wailing revenant or an abhorrent monster. Perhaps, even a den of thieves lurking beneath the streets?

The old man, clearly fed up with having to hear those unpleasant noises day in and day out, asked Klaus if he could do something about them.

"It's not as if there's any great reason behind it. So is there anything wrong with having you guys help check it out?"

Klaus, the ever faithful student, seemed to jump at the old man's request to find a solution to the noise pollution. After that he had tried to catch up with people all over town, collecting rumours and gossip.

Since he was their guide, after all, Camilla and the rest had followed him...

The destination they eventually arrived at was this abandoned diner.

○

"Mistress, we really should stop after all. We don't know what kind of place this is, it might be dangerous. Just leave that man here and let's go back with Lord Alois."

Nicole looked up at Camilla, saying that as she clung to her sleeve. Was she worried for Camilla or angry at Klaus? Maybe she just wanted to go back herself because of a fear of the unknown?

But no matter how desperate Nicole's pleading eyes looked, Camilla couldn't concede to her wishes.

– Because returning to the mansion alone with Lord Alois right now is...

If she walked back with Alois, Nicole would have to keep several steps behind them at a respectful distance for a servant. Klaus didn't seem interested in quitting his rummaging around the diner so she would be left to walk alone with Alois. She had no idea what to talk about with him, but the inevitable awkward silence that would inevitably fill the vacuum would be even more unbearable.

If that was the case, it would actually be preferable to engage in Klaus' misadventures. She had actually enjoyed her time touring the town. After all, she was able to talk to all sorts of people and enter interesting shops she would have never thought of visiting by herself.

Camilla recalled the times back in the royal capital when that rule-breaking maid of hers would take her on walks through town. Back then, compared to now, strolling down the streets like a regular commoner had far higher stakes. It really was reckless for someone in her position, looking back.

But despite that, Camilla was still hesitant about stepping through this abandoned place. If Camilla was alone, it would be fine... Well, not exactly fine, but she could take personal responsibility if anything happened. But right now, Alois and Nicole were with her as well. She would feel guilty if she dragged Nicole into something she clearly didn't want to do and there would be serious consequences should any harm befall Alois. Should she just endure the awkwardness and return with Alois?

– I really don't feel like going back after all...

"Lord Alois... What would you like to do?"

I don't want to go back. As Camilla spoke quietly to Alois, she did her best to project those feelings through her voice. Alois looked at Camilla, then nodded as if it were only natural.

"Let's do it."

"Yes... Excuse me?"

"Let's investigate the underground."

Camilla blinked in surprise. She was certain that Alois would say something like 'Let's go back'. Alois was the lord of this land, after all. It was strange for him to even be near this strange looking shop, much less without any proper escort.

"Won't it be dangerous? We don't know what's down there?"

"Well, we'll just have to manage somehow. I'm also worried about the source of the noise, after all."

"How will you manage if there really is something strange down there!?"

Klaus was dainty and Alois was unfit. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't see either of them being able to deal with an emergency. Of course, Camilla had no power herself, she would probably even lose to Nicole in an arm wrestle.

"...He's not gonna go back."

As Camilla stood in confusion, Klaus' voice echoed from the back of the abandoned diner.

"That's 'cause he's keeping an eye on me, after all."

“...An eye? What do you mean?”

Klaus turned around, looking at Camilla who couldn't keep up with what he was saying. From where he was, he first looked at Camilla who had a puzzled frown on her face, then at Alois who was scratching his cheek awkwardly.

Alois grimaced as Klaus looked at him. It was the expression of someone who had been caught red-handed.

Klaus sighed, his usual laissez-faire expression hardening ever so slightly.

“That guy wasn't interested in looking at the town from the beginning, only at me. He even waived the escort just to try and put me at ease. Besides, he has a monstrous amount of magic, so there shouldn't be a problem.”

Klaus looked more and more irritated as he continued to speak.

“Was it father that put you up to this? Since I'm sure he'd love for you to see just how much of a disgrace of a son I am. He couldn't persuade aunty, so I guess he's trying to get you on his side.”

Camilla slowly turned away from Klaus to look at Alois. As he noticed Camilla's gaze, his face looked apologetic.

“I'm sorry but, Camilla, it really is true that I wanted to take a walk with you. If things get busy from now on, I might not get the opportunity.”

“Man, this guy is amazing at acting all principled at the drop of a hat. He deceived me and you too. That's the kind of guy he is! And that's why I hate him!”

As Klaus spat those words at him, Alois frowned slightly. His expression was complicated, equal parts lonely and sad, but also with a strange sense of affection... Just what was that? Compassion?

“...You really are a good man, after all.”

“Hearing that from a guy like you doesn't make me happy at all, y'know.”

With a dismissive click of the tongue, Klaus went into the depths of the diner alone.

Alois stepped forward as if to follow him, then turned back towards Camilla.

As Alois looked at Camilla, neither of them said a word.

Another awkward silence.

She didn't want to be alone with him and she wanted to avoid talking with him as well.

But just thinking that way made Camilla feel a strange sense of depression.

Once again, Camilla just couldn't understand those selfish feelings of hers.

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If it were Prince Julian...

If it were Prince Julian who was here instead, he wouldn't have given Camilla an apologetic look like that.

He wouldn't have looked to see if Camilla had been hurt. He didn't care about what went on inside Camilla's heart. Even if he spoke softly with her, was there truly anything behind those words?

Prince Julian treated people on the principle of efficacy. Behind that open-hearted display of his, he coldly sorted people according to whether or not they were useful to him, calculating his warmth for those he truly wished to have on his side.

He didn't do strange things like Alois did. He used that face of his properly. And without knowing his true face, she had fallen in love with the mask.

"Camilla?"

As Alois called out to her, Camilla looked down. She wanted to meet his gaze, to puff out her chest proudly like usual, but her body didn't move the way she willed it.

She heard that strange hymn again in the distance. A song she didn't want to hear, a song sung for a wedding. A song about two star-crossed lovers overcoming the odds and living happily ever after. Why was it that song seemed to reach her ears when she wanted to hear it the least?

"Camilla, shall we go back?"

If he were Prince Julian, he wouldn't have said such kind words.

Alois stirred next to her. It was as if he had given up on surveilling Klaus, but instead gave his full attention to Camilla. As she looked down, she could see Nicole's idle hands trembling in anxiety.

– I have to raise my head.

Tightening her hands into fists, Camilla took a deep breath.

Then...

With a jarring rumble, the ground shook.

As it did, she heard a woman's shriek. After that, an ominous beating that sounded like a hammer being smashed on a wall and an unbearable screeching that seemed like the point of an iron nail being dragged down a sheet of metal followed suit. The thuds constantly echoed, one after another. Those horrible sounds came from the depths... And in the direction of the back of the diner they stood in front of.

"W-W-What's happening!?"

Nicole cried out in terror. Was the reason she was so terrified of the rumbling from underground because of the manastone incident she had been wrapped up in some months ago?

Certainly, the sounds came from the underground and certainly, the ground rumbled slightly beneath their feet. Yet, instinctively, Camilla knew right away this wasn't an earthquake. An earthquake didn't sound quite this unpleasant, after all.

– In fact, this underground noise, could it be...?

Camilla suddenly forgot all of her hesitations and, raising her face, stomped into the ruined diner. Alois and Nicole were stunned at her sudden move, lagging behind her as she went.

“What’s wrong all of a sudden, Camilla!?”

Only catching up to Camilla with his long strides, Alois called out to her in confusion. But, Camilla didn't stop to answer him, instead, she squared her shoulders and kept striding straight ahead.

“Lord Alois, the source of this infernal racket is obvious!”

Even as she said that the high pitched shrieking from underground grated on her ears. It mixed with the other unpleasant noises, creating a horribly dissonant din. Certainly, if this was happening constantly, the townspeople around here would never get a good night's sleep.

From the underground, in the direction of the back of the diner, the horrible sound got even stronger. Klaus grimaced as he looked back at them, his expression clearly saying that he agreed with Camilla's assessment as he clasped his hands over his ears.

As they came closer, they saw that he was standing next to a set of stone stairs behind an opened iron door, that appeared to lead down to a basement of sorts. Klaus must have been the one who opened that up, as the horrible sounds from the basement seemed to wash up the stairs.

Camilla stood at the top of the stairs to the basement, then shouted at the top of her lungs into the depths.

“I demand that you stop that awful performance this very instant!!”

Back in the royal capital, music appreciation was always in vogue.

Listening to excellent performances was one of the aristocracy's finest privileges, therefore it was considered a mark of noble pride to be able to discern a truly good artisan of sound.

Thus, Camilla had a personal stake when it came to music. To hear a performance that gave new meaning to the word awful, she wouldn't easily forgive those who subjected her ears to such musical violence.

The only musical instruments that society saw fit for use in Mohnton were a person's mouth to sing hymns, as well as church organs to set the melody.

What's more, only specially trained nuns were considered acceptable singers. The musical scores were strictly managed and maintained by the church, never to be seen by the public.

With nobody making or selling musical instruments, it had been near impossible to obtain one.

However, things changed when the market in Grenze opened up to foreign trade. As 'forbidden' as it was, now anyone determined enough could now likely procure an instrument.

As she stormed into the basement, the first person she noticed was the young man with the violin. Then, the girl who dropped her flute in shock. Then, two boys, the smaller one still with his lips on his oboe and the larger one mid strike on his drum. Lastly, there was one girl who didn't have an instrument at all.

This must have been where the diner once stored its food supplies. In that basement, with shelves lining all the walls, those five young boys and girls stood in the center, still silent in shock. Their ages looked to range from the mid-to-late teens up to their early twenties. Yet although they were in an underground cellar of a ruined restaurant in a poor part of town, they weren't dressed to match.

On some of the empty shelves were laid some other old looking musical instruments, as if in reverence. Musical sheets and scores that she had never seen before were pasted all over the shelves, with all sorts of minute notes scribbled in the margins. Not just on the shelves either, they were scattered all over the floor.

Camilla, who had charged in ahead of the rest of the group, almost fell off balance as she tried to avoid stomping on one of the sheets underneath her feet.

"Just what is the meaning of this, you are going to ruin the sheets this way! And you, what kind of musician drops their instrument in such a way!?"

As Camilla raised her voice, the young musicians all stared at her wide-eyed, whilst the flutist girl yelped in surprise as Camilla barked at her specifically. It was as if they had been suddenly frightened by the appearance of a ghost.

"You, the violinist! When was the last time you tuned your instrument!? Drummer, did no one tell you to never play your instrument on the ground like that!? It will ruin the sound! And as for you-"

"Now now, it won't do to get so angry."

Following after Camilla, Klaus walked leisurely down the stairs. It looked like he was still reeling from the performance, scratching at his ear awkwardly.

"Hmm, I see. So the culprit behind all this was a musical murder, huh?"

"...Mister Klaus!?"

When they turned to look at Klaus, one of the young musicians shouted in shock. Their expressions changed completely as well. From astonishment to fear. The blood drained from their faces, as they turned as pale as sheets.

Alois and Nicole came down the stairs after Klaus, but the young people didn't even look in their direction. Although Camilla had been the first one to bound down the stairs and angrily shout at them, they weren't looking at her anymore either.

All of their eyes were fixed firmly on Klaus.

"M-Mister Klaus... W-We haven't told anyone about this..."

"Hmm?"

Klaus looked a little puzzled at the words of the young violinist, whose voice shook terribly. He was a handsome looking young man, with neat brown hair, but right now his pale face was etched with fear.

"We will never do it again! So please, don't tell anyone! I'm begging you!!"

Falling to his knees as he implored him, the four others put their instruments down and fell to the floor in the same way. Klaus looked truly confused at suddenly being the object of so much fear.

"Ah, no no, I wouldn't ever do something like that. Even if you weren't so frightened."

"I-Is that really true? Can a member of the Lörriich family truly be expected to keep their silence!?"

"Yes...?"

Klaus crossed his arms. As he looked at the people kneeling in front of him so fearfully, he groaned a little bit.

It was true that, by tradition, music was virtually forbidden in Mohnton.

But even if they were found out, it wouldn't cost them their lives. Sure, the instruments and musical scores that could be found would go up in smoke, but they would definitely be able to hide at least some away. What's more, if they got them once in the first place, they could certainly find or buy more.

Were these instruments really so valuable that they would beg to spare them like this, as if they were begging for their own lives?

Just what could have driven them to such fear?

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The young violinist was called Victor.

The flutist girl was called Finne.

The drummer's name was Dieter, the oboist was Otto.

As for the young lady who didn't have an instrument, the group's singer, her name was Verrat.

All five of them were Blume natives and childhood friends. They had been born to relatively well-off households, so they had some knowledge about the arts and entertainment that were popular in the royal capital.

And that had led to this.

Once a curious mind gains knowledge, it only made sense to want to put theory to practice. They themselves wanted to become musicians, as taboo as it was in Mohnton to do so.

All five of them had acquired instruments that they had taken an interest in, learning together through trial and error in this dingy cellar.

They had no teacher nor performances to watch and copy, so their performances which had relied purely on their own readings of the sheet music they had acquired had eventually become the source of the rumoured awful noises over the course of the past few months.

"I was the one who found this place. This place used to be a diner that my parents owned, but after that business went under it has been abandoned for some years, so..."

Still bowing his head down low as he sank down on his knees, Victor spoke. As Klaus listened to him, he glanced at one of the pieces of sheet music by his feet.

"Over there is the first instrument I got, my first violin. We left it on the shelf. The strings broke so we can't use it anymore. There were other instruments I didn't really understand, so that's why I reached out to everyone else to join me."

In the beginning, they didn't have any grand plans of truly playing music. They had just been curious about these instruments they had never seen before, making all sorts of strange sounds.

But, things had changed three months ago.

Victor had proposed to the girl he loved, a young lady in town. Apparently, she was the daughter of a craftsman whose work his family greatly valued. Even though there was a difference in social rank between the two families, he had still somehow managed to gain the permission of his parents and all that remained was to wait for the day they would be wed.

"Everyone said they wanted to play a marriage hymn for my sake. In this town, hymns are only permitted when one gets married, after all."

"...That is the only time a hymn is allowed?"

Camilla couldn't help but interject as Victor spoke despondently. There was something strange in what Victor said.

Strange... Because Camilla had just heard a hymn like that above ground.

"Are hymns now allowed to be sung at the church? Because in fact, I heard it just a few moments ago."

"Ahh, that hymn is a little different... It's one dedicated to the royal marriage. Between Prince Julian and Lady Liselotte."

Camilla's shoulders stiffened, as she turned around to glare at Alois, who avoided her glare. She knew it after all. Maybe he thought he was being kind in his silence, but she could only see it as being coddled again.

Victor didn't notice Camilla scowling at Alois. Not knowing that Camilla was, in fact, Camilla, he continued as if nothing had happened.

"Since their marriage is taking place in the new year, they've been practicing at the church for a while now. To lift the spirits of the town and bless the royal couple."

Although it was said to be a blessing, it wasn't a lively song by any means. It was more of a quiet prayer for the prosperity of the royal family, as well as the health of the town and the church.

The same could be said of Mohnton weddings as well. It was not to be any sort of grand and jubilant celebration, instead, it was focused on the ceremony itself. With the centerpiece being the couple swearing their vows in public before God. There wasn't any singing or dancing, no grand or humorous speeches, merely a muted occasion to be quietly enjoyed amongst family. That was Mohnton's matrimonial tradition.

"Everyone wants to play a wedding song for my sake, it just so happened that one of the scores we found is like that."

"Hmm..."

Klaus expressed that he got the gist of their story as he kept looking through the musical scores littered by his feet, then exhaled slightly in amazement as he finished.

"It's old, but it really like teach's scores. Maybe there was a guy like him back in the day?"

"That may be... Ah, right, when we close the door up there, it mostly keeps in the sound. We usually try and make sure that it always stays closed, but... Maybe when people are leaving and going, the sound might have leaked out?"

Victor sighed, a note of depression creeping into his speech.

"Maybe it'd be best to quit after all. It's a bother to everyone, and it's dangerous too..."

"It's dangerous?"

Klaus asked him that. Judging by Victor's still pale face, that danger didn't seem to just be limited to the burning of their instruments and scores.

“...Mister Klaus, you’ve been away from Blume for a while now, so it only makes sense you haven’t heard about what’s been going on in town recently.”

As Victor raised his head, it was as if he was searching for someone. He looked at the faces of Klaus, Alois, Camilla, and Nicole in turn, then made sure there was no one else hiding. He even seemed hesitant to speak at all.

“You don’t have to tell us if you’re that afraid, y’know. I mean, it’d have to be something serious, if you’re coming all the way here to play in a cellar.”

“...Right. You’re right about that.”

Victor nodded timidly as Klaus tried to reassure him, yet although the fright hadn’t yet drained from his voice, he spoke up.

“Recently... There has been a vigilante militia established in town. Originally there was a vigilante group established by the young people in town, but this group is something completely different. Nobody will say it, but it’s an open secret that they are being led by the Lörriich family.”

“Hmm...”

“They’re much harsher than the group from before. It’s not just music and dancing and such either, as well. If you’re caught criticizing the way that the Lörriich family is doing things or even openly speaking well of you, Mister Klaus, they will drag you off the streets.”

His quiet voice echoed through the otherwise silent cellar. Surrounded by those cold stone walls, Alois and Klaus both crossed their arms almost in time. This must be giving them both a lot to think about.

“This doesn’t happen as often, but I’ve seen it... Sometimes, when people are caught, they’re given a severe beating right on the spot. Usually, they do it in public, like out in the plaza. They give an excuse about them ‘resisting’, but really I think it’s just making an example of people.”

Victor’s hands gripped into fists on his knees, still sitting on the ground. Despite his fear, there was also a boiling sense of anger and revulsion behind the young man’s expression.

“If we are found out, we’ll surely be dragged away as well. Not just us either, both Mia’s... My fiancée’s family will be in trouble, as will mine. Since this was all started for my sake and we’ve put so much effort in, I want to continue, but...”

But...

Victor’s voice trailed off before he could continue. His pale face somehow seemed even more drained of colour. His four friends were the same as well. Their fearful eyes all gazed towards the stairs leading above ground as one.

And from the top of the stairs, there was a creaking sound. The door to the cellar that had been left open closed with a slam.

Then, there were the sounds of footsteps on the stairs.

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“Oh? Victor, is your practice already over?”

It was a cheerful young woman who came down the stairs. She must have been around the same age as Camilla, or perhaps a year younger. Her hair was a shade of ruddy brown and her eyebrows were slightly thick. She wouldn't ever rank amongst the most beautiful women of the royal court, but she was a pretty girl all the same.

As soon as they heard her voice come down the stairs, the five young musicians instantly relaxed. The way that colour flooded back into Victor's face was remarkable.

“Mia!”

“Mm. I came to look for you since the Master was calling after you, but... Guests? That's unusual, isn't it?”

The girl, whose name was Mia, looked curiously at Camilla and the others. She looked at each of the four visitors, all much better dressed than Victor's group, then her eyes widened in surprise as she realized something.

“...Wait, isn't that Lord Klaus!? Why have you come to such a place!?”

“Hmm... I was exploring?”

“Ah, is that so... So that's why the door to the stairs was open? Gosh, that's dangerous... I'm glad it was only you this time, Lord Klaus, but what if it were someone else?”

With a sigh, Mia turned an angry eye towards Victor. Then, without letting him avoid her gaze for a second, she walked right up to him.

“Do you truly understand just how dangerous this is? If you're found out, the Master will be in trouble, and so will I-”

“I know. Mia, trust me, I know.”

With Mia right up in his face, Victor shook his head hurriedly. But, Mia still looked at him dubiously. Victor tried to avoid her eyes as he spoke to change the subject.

“A-Anyways, Mia, you said that father was looking for me?”

“...Mm. That's right. Victor, did you forget that you had a business meeting this evening? The Master was in a panic because the client should be arriving any minute.”

“Geh.”

With a frown, Victor stood up in a panic. Then, he raced up the stairs... But not before turning and bowing deeply to the group in front of him.

“Lord Klaus, my apologies. Even though we were in the middle of our discussion, there's some urgent business I have to attend...!”

“Ahh... Okay.”

“My apologies, but I’ll be off!”

Once his violin was back on the shelf, Victor flew up the stairs like the wind.

“I’m very sorry that he has caused you so much trouble.”

Mia bowed to the cellar’s visitors with an apologetic look. Then, with a sigh, she raised her head.

“I should also be returning. Please excuse me.”

With those words, Mia followed Victor up the stairs.

After that, the eight people left in the basement were left a little dumbfounded.

“So that’s Mia, his fiancée?”

After the storm that had rocked the cellar subsided, Camilla muttered to herself.

She had a blunt way of talking just as you’d expect of someone from a craftsman’s family, but she was pretty and seemed like a good person. She liked the way that she was polite yet untimid in front of a group of nobles. She seemed like a good match for Victor, who seemed to struggle a little bit with adversity.

“Mia, hmm? If I remember right, she was the daughter of Mister Trost, the tailor. I took a few lessons from him in the past.”

Camilla’s ears perked up as Klaus whispered to himself. As she turned to look at Klaus, who was busy staring into space with his hand on his chin as he pondered it, Camilla was a little astonished.

“You really did anything, didn’t you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being super curious, right?”

Is that what he tells himself?

That little bit of astonishment changed back into disgust as Camilla sighed.

○

“...Maybe it would really be best to stop after all?”

After Victor and Mia had left and the door to the cellar had been closed once again, it was Finne who broke the silence of the young musicians with a worried voice.

“No matter how much we play, we don’t get any better... In the first place, we don’t even know how to get better at all. And we can’t just keep doing something dangerous like this forever?”

“You... Might be right.”

Dieter groaned a little bit as he agreed with her. He turned to Otto beside him for a little bit of help.

“Things are different from when we started, we should think about things a little more.”

“I won’t quit.”

Even though the other three had downcast expressions, Verrat spoke out with determination. As the other three turned to look at her... In fact, not just them, but all of Camilla's group as well, Verrat's spirit didn't waver.

"This is for Victor's sake. We cannot just give up halfway."

When Verrat looked around, Camilla saw something. There was a fire in that girl's eyes.

Her dark brown hair was cut short for a woman's, though it was neatly styled. Those high eyebrows of hers paired with her rouge tinged lips cut a striking image. It was an expression that oozed confidence. As she stood upright, it was as if she embodied both a woman's charm and a man's gallantry. A dignified and beautiful young woman.

"We have to give it our all for our friend. Because everyone here wants to give him a wedding to remember, right?"

"I'd expect nothing less of you, huh..."

Dieter sounded amazed as he looked at Verrat.

"You used to love Victor back in the day as well. You really are a good person."

"That is all in the past. In fact, I forgot it until you brought it up just now. But, the reason I want to bless his marriage isn't just because I used to love him, once."

Those words that came straight from Verrat's heart didn't have any hesitation to them. As Verrat smiled softly, Finne looked at her in admiration.

"Because he's an important person to me, I will wish *both* of them happiness at their celebration. No matter what, for their sake, I can't hold any sort of grudge or envy. Being petulant and jealous over things like that is childish, after all. You can't call that love, either."

"You're amazing, Vera. There's such a difference between someone like you and that Camilla from the rumours."

"...What?"

As she listened to Verrat and Finne talk, Camilla's eyebrows dropped into a glare. But, neither of them even looked at Camilla. It didn't seem as if they had any idea the woman they were bad mouthing was standing right in front of them.

"Camilla was so full of bitter jealousy that she cursed her rival, Liselotte, and did all sorts of awful things to her, that's how the story goes, right? I suppose there are people like that out there."

"Oh come on, I was never anything like that."

Verrat pretended to be hurt as she laughed a little bit. 'Don't compare me to something that awful', it seemed like she was saying. There was just a slight hint of disgust in her expression.

"I never want to become an unsightly girl like that. You really shouldn't think that all women have to be like that, you know? I want to stay beautiful. Most women don't want to expose a disgusting, ugly side to themselves like that."

“...Stop right there.”

With that, Nicole stepped forward toward Verrat and the others.

Camilla almost fell over as she reached out to stop her. As Nicole tried to stomp forward angrily, Camilla had a hard time keeping a hold of her shoulder.

“Mistress, don’t stop me-”

But as she looked back at Camilla, Nicole suddenly went quiet.

Alois and Klaus, who were just a second behind Nicole in wanting to shout at Verrat, didn’t dare to speak a word.

It’s because they too both saw Camilla’s face.

Camilla stayed quiet, but her expression was burning with rage.

It was taking all the determination she had to not lose herself completely to her anger.

But, as much as she tried to calm herself down, there was nothing that could be done.

In the very next moment, Camilla lost all thought and notion of self-control.

“Well, I AM sorry for being so unsightly!”

Pushing Nicole aside, Camilla stood face to face with Verrat.



The two girls seemed confused as to why Camilla had suddenly butt into the middle of their conversation, b. But, that confusion soon turned to fear at her naked hostility towards them.

“W-What do you...?”

“What exactly is wrong about wanting to be loved by the person you love? So what if I was jealous? So what if I held a grudge? What’s wrong with that?”

“Huh...?”

Verrat and Finne began to tremble terribly. That only made sense, of course. Who wouldn’t be deeply frightened if someone who was obviously higher on the social ladder turned their unmistakably venomous hatred towards you like this, for a reason you can’t even understand?

But, Camilla didn’t have eyes with which to see their scared faces. Neither did she have ears to hear the voice of someone behind her, trying to calm her down.

The only thing she could feel was the anger building up in her head, like a torrent of water against a dam. That rising heat gave way to the cold words that came from Camilla’s lips.

“Even if the one I loved chooses another, I should just throw away my feelings and meekly congratulate the two of them? When I see him side by side with someone who isn’t me, should I just happily smile in their direction?”

Camilla got right up into Verrat’s face. Staring straight into the girl’s eyes, she didn’t notice the cold sweat that was pouring down her face.

“When your true love chose another, you still decided to smile for their sake, is that it? But that beautiful love of yours? I cannot do it!”

She couldn’t see Verrat’s face anymore, all she could see was the mocking expression of one of the noble girls of the royal palace instead. Eyes that sneered at her love that never came to be. Although they all too had love Prince Julian in the same way, they had all given up on him long ago.

Camilla, however, was the only one who never gave up.

Verrat was rooted to the spot as she trembled. She was just a commoner, terrified by the noble in front of her whom she had no power with which to go against. She understood that for some reason, this noblewoman was getting back at her. Well, actually, that wasn’t quite right. Right now, Camilla barely remembered who it was that she was shouting at, or even truly where she was anymore. Camilla wasn’t thinking, the words that came tumbling out of her mouth were pure emotion.

She truly had loved him. And therefore, Camilla had become unsightly.

“Even if I was unsightly, even if I was ugly, I just wanted to be loved!”

– Prince Juli... an...

The back of the man she had always chased after floated through Camilla’s thoughts. No matter how much Camilla yearned after him, he would never turn around to look at her.

All she could remember in her mind was his back.

“I wanted to see myself in his eyes! I wanted to support His Highness! I wanted to stand by his side! Those were my feelings; how could I just give up on them like you did...!?”

“Stop it at once!”

A strong force separated Camilla from Verrat, who were almost eyeball to eyeball to her. A booming voice that even drowned out Camilla’s anguished cries.

Alois took Camilla’s hand. Pulling her away from Verrat, he tried to bring Camilla back to her senses.

When she turned around, she saw herself reflected in Alois’ severe eyes. Camilla’s face had twisted out of her own control. Was she crying? Laughing? Or was it a mask of pure unbridled anger?

“Lord Alois, I...!!”

“Let’s step outside. You need some fresh air.”

“But!”

“You aren’t yourself right now. So, let’s step outside.”

That sort of blunt tone was rare for Alois. Yet although Camilla was burning with passion, her hot hand stood in contrast to just how chilly Alois’ was. He led Camilla by the hand, his stiff face holding its tongue.

“Lord Alois!”

He wasn’t interested in what she had to say right now. Alois didn’t say a word in response to Camilla, as he half dragged her out of the cellar by the hand.

“Lord... Alois? That was him?”

“Then that Lady was... It can’t be...”

From behind, she could hear the growing horror in the voices of the two young women who truly didn’t know anything. They just realized they had committed an act that could carry far more heinous consequences than just playing music.

But, right now, Camilla was in no frame of mind to realize their ignorance, much less to forgive it.

She was angry at everything. Her anger had boiled over so much, she didn’t think there was a lid capable of containing it anymore.

Pulling the iron door at the top of the stairs aside, he brought her back through the deserted and ruined diner and out onto the street, where the sun had begun to dip towards the horizon.

The wind whistling through the alley carried with it, a few errant notes of Prince Julian and Liselotte’s wedding hymn. Nicole scrambled behind them in a worried panic, but Alois didn’t stop at all, leaving her behind.

“Lord Alois! Please let me go at once! I still have things I need to say!”

“I won’t. Did you see their faces?”

It was plain to see how petrified they were. They were confused by Camilla's anger, and truly scared of the possible disrespect and offense they had caused without even knowing.

"All the more reason to set them straight!"

"It's only natural for you to get angry. But, they weren't out to hurt you. This is my fault, after all, I should have stepped in sooner."

"Are you implying that just because they didn't mean any harm, I shouldn't say anything!?"

Camilla struggled to free herself from Alois' grip. Even if he was overweight and flabby, he was still strong. No matter how violently she twisted and pulled, he didn't budge an inch.

"Oh, well, because they didn't mean any harm, I suppose that's alright then!? I should have just sat quietly and listened, is that it!?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

Alois finally stopped walking, though he still held Camilla's hand.

The narrow alley was carpeted in a thin layer of snow. There was nobody around. Behind them, there were only Alois and Camilla's footprints were imprinted on the snow.

As Camilla still struggled desperately to escape from him, Alois looked back at her. His usual calm smile was gone. That face of his was still familiar though... It looked like Camilla's, whenever she tried to hold back her passions.

"That's why I stopped you. It wasn't just for their sake, but for mine as well."

"What are you...?"

In front of Alois' strong gaze, Camilla grew quiet. She had no intention of being intimidated by him, but the words just wouldn't come out. Even her arm, which she was trying so desperately to pull out of Alois' grip before, lost its strength.

"Camilla, I know that you didn't really mean any harm either. I know that you were thinking of someone else. But even though I knew you were feeling hurt, I didn't step forward in time to stop them, so I don't have any right to criticize you at all."

But even though he said that, Alois' still exhaled heavily, his breath steaming in the cold air. That firm expression of his looked like it was holding back a wave of anger with self-control.

Yet, maybe that wasn't quite right?

Instead of anger, those blinking red eyes betrayed a feeling of lonely sadness.

– If he were Prince Julian, would he have shown me a face like this?

"Camilla... I just didn't want to hear it anymore."

Locking eyes with Camilla, Alois' voice grew soft, almost to a whisper.

"Because your words hurt me as well."

His quiet words evaporated into the air of that snowy town along with the steam of his breath.

Alois didn't say another word, as Camilla stared at him in silence. That body of hers that had been wrapped in fiery anger chilled in the cool wind.

– If he were Prince Julian...

Camilla's heart still swirled as she faced Alois. Even if they both had that same silver hair and pair of red eyes, Alois and Prince Julian were as far apart as could be.

– If he were Prince Julian, he wouldn't say that. If he were Prince Julian, I would have been happy with his consolation, even if it was a lie. If he were Prince Julian, he wouldn't have been hurt. If he were Prince Julian...

That hollow comparison smouldered in Camilla's heart.

Camilla knew that the comparison was unfair. But in that uncomfortable silence between them, as Camilla looked at him, her mind rolled over all the differences between Alois and Julian.

She could still hear that faint hymn from somewhere in the distance.

It was the song she had dreamed over and over of hearing one day, as she and Prince Julian stood together before an altar, hand in hand.

In the end, Camilla returned with Alois to the Lörriich family mansion.

Despite it ostensibly being an extension of their hospitality, the dinner they had with the Lörriich family was a thoroughly awkward affair. Not to mention her discomfort with sitting at the same table as Gerda, the barely disguised hostility between the members of the Lörriich family made it even more uncomfortable for Camilla as an outsider.

But above all, the one she felt the most awkward being near was Alois. At the dinner party, they barely talked to one another, only exchanging words when they had to. She didn't know whether or not she was keeping up in these conversations at all, either. Was Camilla even properly answering their questions anymore? Just what kind of expression did she make while sitting next to Alois? Just what did they all think of her appearance right now?

– Why did this have to happen?

When that awkward dinner party finally came to an end, everyone retired to their rooms. Camilla, alone, stood exposed in the night air.

She stood on the balcony of the mansion's second floor. The white balustrade that ringed it was nearly buried in snow and the chilly wind numbed the skin on her face. Even though she wore her shawl, it did little to keep out the biting cold.

Going outside on a blustery winter night like this was a ridiculous idea... If she wanted to wallow away in her own sentiments, why couldn't she have done it in front of the hearth? Even as she thought so, the cold air helped in cooling down Camilla's heart. She regained a little of the calm she had lost during the day.

– It is true that I may have gone too far.

Those two girls were just ignorant commoners. All they knew of Camilla was the figure peddled in the rumours.

They didn't know her face, nor her true self. For them, Camilla was merely a villainess, a wicked woman who had stepped out from the fairy tales and into the real world.

They didn't know that the Camilla they giggled about had been standing right in front of them. Perhaps because he leaned more towards human than toad nowadays, they didn't realize Lord Alois was there either. They had no intentions of insulting the people who stood in front of them like that.

What's more, the fact that Camilla fought against Liselotte wasn't fiction. It's true that if one considered the love between Liselotte and Prince Julian to be a fact, Camilla, who opposed it, did play the role of the villainess. Camilla must also have looked unsightly as she chased after the Prince, desperately averting her eyes from the defeat looking her square in the face. As for the face she made when she cursed and scorned Liselotte in hatred, what could one call it but ugly?

– And yet...

“Even so, I didn't do anything wrong.”

But those young musicians weren't really at fault. If Camilla hadn't been the subject of them, she probably would have laughed and gossiped with her friends about the rumours as well.

However, Camilla wasn't wrong either. Thus, it was only natural that she would get angry.

According to him, the words that Camilla said had wounded Alois as well, but in saying so, Alois hadn't done anything wrong.

Then, just who was at fault?

"Ah, jeeeeeeez, what am I supposed to even do!?"

Walking over to the edge of the balcony, she grasped the railing. As her fingers were buried in that freezing snow, they became so numb she could barely feel them anymore. All she could see in front of her was the dark courtyard and the faint lights of the town below. At the horizon's edge, the trace remains of the crimson sunset bled into the hues of a darkened sky. She looked south, towards the royal capital, but she couldn't see it from here.

In the capital... In the capital, Prince Julian and Liselotte must be looking forward to a beautiful wedding.

The spot by Prince Julian's side that Camilla had always dreamed of would be Liselotte instead.

Everyone would give the two their earnest blessings. Prince Julian and Liselotte would embrace happily, never again remembering Camilla who stood numb and freezing only in winter's embrace.

"Frustrating...!"

Camilla wondered just where everything had gone wrong. Was there really just something wrong with her after all? Should she have given up on that hopeless love? Should she have thrown away the feelings she kept in her heart for over a decade?

"So frustrating!"

Camilla bit her lip in anger. She had already lost the calm it took her so long to get back. She squeezed the railing in her grip as much as she could, her breathing ragged.

"But I'll definitely be the one looking down on you all someday!!"

Did they already think she'd given up? Frustrating. Frustrating. Vexing. Frustrating. Suffocating. Frustrating.

She wouldn't ever be satisfied until she could lord it over all of them. Camilla would make them regret their scorn from the very bottom of their hearts.

So, she won't cry.

If she showed them weakness, wouldn't it be over before it began?

"...Oh? A rare visitor?"

As Camilla stood on the balcony, she heard a joking voice from behind her. She didn't even have to turn around to know it was Klaus.

Camilla took a deep breath as she closed her eyes. Letting all her emotions seep back into that sallow darkness of the winter night, she turned on her heels to look at him.

“What are you doing here? If you stand around outside in the cold like that, you’ll get ill.”

“First, what are *you doing here*?”

“I just came to enjoy the twilight.”

Klaus’ smile was odd, it didn’t seem to suit that usual joking attitude of his at all. Then, without giving Camilla a chance to rebuke him, he stood next to her, leaning his back against the railing.

“So, what about you? Are you alright...?”

“None of your business.”

With a ‘hmpf’, Camilla snorted and turned away as Klaus gave her a sidelong glance. Klaus was the last person she wanted worrying about her.

Klaus shook his head a little at Camilla’s ever bullish attitude. When he opened his mouth to speak again, it was back to his usual frivolous voice, as if trying to change the subject.

“So...the truth about the noise coming from underground wasn’t a big deal after all, huh? I was half hoping it would be a monster or some secret organization, though.”

“That’s right. There were always rumours about a ghost in the royal palace as well, but I’m sure they were something similar after all.”

Camilla remembered the rumours about a pale ghost that stalked the halls of the royal palace at night that was at one time the most popular topic amongst the ladies of high society. There had been many who claimed to have seen it, and there were all sorts of ridiculous stories flying around that it was the spirit of a nobleman who rebelled against the royal family or the revenant shade of a royal family member executed long ago.

To try and impress the noble girls that they were wooing, many irresponsible young noblemen’s sons tried to outdo each other in stupidity by attempting to capture or sight the ghost somehow, but nothing ever came of it. To the young ladies who eventually tired of it, it was just another amusing piece of gossip.

– That was nostalgic, just when was it that I last thought about that?

At that time, Camilla still had people who at the very least pretended to be her friends. Though that changed a lot after she began to oppose Liselotte.

Laughing slightly, Klaus looked at Camilla.

“By the way... Can you play music?”

“Haa?”

Camilla inadvertently looked at him incredulously in response to that sudden question. Just where on earth had that come from?

Klaus simply shrugged as Camilla looked at him suspiciously. With another carefree laugh, white steam stained the air.

“Back in the cellar, you were giving them a hard time for that instrument or another. Because of how things are around here, there isn’t really anyone who knows their stuff when it comes to music, right? So I was thinking that if you could play an instrument...”

“I cannot.”

“Ah...?”

“I have never done it, not even once.”

Camilla said it like that was only the most natural thing as she cut off Klaus’ words. It was hard to describe Klaus’ expression, halfway between annoyance and disappointment.

But, she was hardly going to claim that she could do what she couldn’t.

“I don’t know how educated you are when it comes to this, but in the royal capital a musician is left to playing music whilst the nobility are entrusted to hearing it. I could potentially sing if pressed, but I have never picked up an instrument.”

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaa!?”

This time, Klaus raised a rare loud voice for him. To Camilla, his face looked as if she had said something completely unbelievable. Even that shocked face of his was somehow well kept together, as expected of a good looking man.

“Even though you’ve never touched an instrument before, you still gave them such a hard time!? Just where do you get off!?”

“I may not be able to do it myself, but that doesn’t stop me from being able to criticize.”

‘Hmph’, Camilla’s exhaled breath was visible in the air as she struck out her chest, her strength of will put into the arm she placed on her hip.

“What’s more, I possess ears. Even if I cannot play an instrument, I can still hear them.”

“That’s... Well, that’s true.”

Klaus chewed on Camilla’s words for a moment, but then gave up. With a laugh, he looked back up into the night sky. There really was something slightly different in that smile compared to his usual flirty self.

“I really like that part of you, y’know? You could say I love it, even.”

“Are you trying to make a fool out of me again?”

“No, it’s praise!”

With tears in the corner of his eyes, Klaus said that. Camilla didn’t get it at all. As he looked at her staring at him dubiously, it only made him smile again.

“Those guys, can you go and see them one more time? I’d like you to listen to their sound with those prideful ears of yours. Maybe if it’s you, you could instruct them when it comes to music?”

“Why would you ask me?”

“Now now, doesn’t this fall under noblesse oblige? This is your chance to show them how calm and dignified a noble you can be, right? Verrat and Dieter were talking about wanting to apologize, too.”

Camilla kept her silence.

To put it bluntly, it seemed that teaching music was just an excuse and what he really wanted was for Camilla to return to that cellar again. He wanted to show those commoners that they hadn’t incurred the life-long wrath of a noble and that bygones could be bygones.

As it stood, Verrat and the others must be fearing what could become of their lives. There are nobles out there who wield their power like a cudgel, always eager to make examples of anyone who crossed them. That impression of nobles was only enhanced because of the Lörich-backed vigilantes in town right now. They were probably even more afraid than usual.

Camilla couldn’t pretend that she wasn’t still angry at them. Yet, all the same, Camilla had no intention of abusing her social position to get revenge. In any case, as it stands, Camilla would have to rely on Alois’ power to do anything like that. Alois was far from the type of person to torment commoners in such a way, and what’s more, Camilla couldn’t say they were totally wrong about everything.

She knew that she hadn’t acted calmly. By letting the blood rush to her head like that, she hadn’t done much to dispel the image they had of the ‘Camilla’ from the rumours.

Camilla didn’t care what people thought of her. Whether they hated or feared her, Camilla would never shirk from what she believed. At least, that’s what she thought before she came to Mohnton.

But now, there was a strange sort of self-control she felt restrained by.

If people truly thought of Camilla as a horrible person... Wouldn’t that surely cause trouble for Alois?

“...I understand.”

After letting go of the breath she had been holding in, Camilla looked at him bitterly.

“However, I never want to hear that noise again. I will whip that sound of theirs into shape until it suits my ears!”

“Thanks, you really are a nice person after all!”

“That attitude of yours...”

As Klaus blurted a thing like that so casually, Camilla glared at him. But no matter how much she scowled at the man, it only ever seemed to further encourage his frivolity.

Klaus leaned on the rails, looking back up towards the night sky. As his arms sunk into the snow, his cheeks were dyed red from the cold. Those winter stars shone through the clear sky, their blue and red twinkling standing against the endless dark.

“...What happened?”

“Hm?”

“You’re different from your usual self.”

Even though she was looking up at Klaus, it sounded as if she were looking down on him as she stood with her hands on her waist. As she stared at him haughtily, Klaus shot back a flirtatious smirk.

“Oh, you’re worried about me? Even though you looked so depressed just a second ago. You’re so sweet you made my heart skip a beat.”

“I am not depressed at all. I’ve already gotten used to that carefree side of you, so stop looking so miserable. It’s unpleasant.”

“Miserable, huh?”

With a sigh, Klaus exhaled. Then, he smiled at her as if he were giggling.

“Even though you’ve been moaning and groaning this whole time?”

“Who is moaning!? Just how rude can you be!?”

“I’m just going off what I’ve heard from you tonight.”

Klaus shrugged as Camilla shouted in his direction. As Klaus turned away and let out a laugh, Camilla angrily gripped her fists. She thought that there was something slightly off about him tonight, but in the end, he was just making a fool out of her as always.

“I see you’re doing just fine. I needn’t have worried about you at all, then!?”

“No, no, it really is all thanks to you.”

With his face slightly brighter than it appeared before, Klaus swept back his hair with a hand. Then, with a breath, he pushed himself off the railing.

He proceeded in taking a few steps to go back into the mansion. But just before crossing the threshold to leave the balcony, Klaus stopped.

Turning back to look at Camilla, Klaus opened his mouth once again. At first, he closed his mouth as if the words had left him. But after looking at his feet, he opened it once more.

“...Actually, do you have a moment? There’s a place I’d like to show you.”

With that fake smile painted on his face, Klaus said those words.

Camilla followed Klaus along a short path into the back of the Lörriich mansion's rear garden. They kept walking until they reached a small building.

The walls of the building were white and featureless. It barely seemed suitable as a storeroom and was hardly fit for anyone to live in. There were several windows, but they were all located on the sloped roof so she couldn't peer inside. There wasn't a chimney either, so there couldn't be a fireplace inside.

As she was led inside the hut, it was surprisingly warm, as if it were designed to keep out the cold.

The source of that warmth was the vast amount of manastone lamps that lit up the interior, making it as bright as if the sun was still hanging in the sky. In all four corners of the room as well, there were magical heating tools. Just how many manastones were being consumed to keep this room warm throughout the winter?

Thanks to the extravagant use of manastones, stepping inside the hut felt like leaping forward in time into spring. Camilla could scarce believe how comfortable it was inside, no fireplace could replicate this.

But what surprised her the most was the scene she beheld in the cabin.

It was as if she were looking at a field of snow, from which a beautifully sweet aroma wafted in the air. Besides the old looking shelf sitting next to the door, the hut had no other features.

Her vision was dominated by the wholly white flowers that sprung up all around her.

"Just what is...?"

A greenhouse. She remembered hearing about these once before. It was a small building that was warmed and lit with magic tools to keep the same climate year-round. Because it naturally cost a small fortune in manastones to maintain, it was rare to see one outside of the confines of a rich florist's business or in the garden of some aristocratic hobbyist.

"You really are carefree, huh? Even though I'm a man, you followed me to this corner of the garden with no one around. If I were a bad guy, wouldn't you be in trouble?"

As Camilla blinked in surprise, looking at all the flowers, Klaus' joking voice came from behind her. It was a threatening joke in poor taste, but Camilla didn't turn around.

"I didn't make a mistake when accompanying you. Since you are all bark and no bite, after all."

"Harsh as ever, huh?"

With a smile, Klaus overtook Camilla and made his way further into the greenhouse. Reaching the centre, he stopped in his tracks.

"This place here, y'see, is my secret little hideaway."

"...Haa?"

Klaus' voice sounded slightly higher pitched than usual as he said that, his back to Camilla.

“When I was still a kid, Father said he would buy me whatever I liked, so I asked for a flower garden that would stay in bloom all year round. Ain’t it great?”

“Quite.”

It was certainly true that the field of blooming flowers was a sight to behold. If she looked down at her feet, it was easy to forget that she was actually indoors.

Looking closely at the beautifully white and delicate looking petals on those flowers, she could see a slight red tinge at the base. The petal’s colour transitioned from red to a light pink and finally to pure white as it stretched out towards those rounded tips.

– I’ve seen these flowers somewhere before.

Camilla frowned as she bent over, looking closely at the flowers stretching out in front of her. It was a flower that she had never seen in the royal capital...

“The flowers growing in here are my favourites. They smell good, right? They’re one of the most important ingredients in the perfumes made here in Blume. They’re Sehnsucht. In the language of flowers, they represent ‘desire’.”

“That’s right... They were on the biscuit you gave me.”

Camilla remembered when she met Klaus for the first time, as well as the flowers with which he decorated his baking.

“You never really took it, though.”

“I crushed it, actually.”

When Camilla said that, Klaus laughed.

His laugh today really was different from usual. Despite not liking his usual attitude much, something about it still bothered Camilla.

“The flower begins to bud during winter, then when spring hits they bloom all at once. This town really is amazing in spring, y’know? The streets are just awash in flowers. It’s not just Sehnsucht, there’s all sorts of colourful flowers.”

The trees that were planted along the sidewalks of town, the flower beds lining the square that were now buried in snow, the flower gardens in all the public spaces, and the potted plants that sat in the gardens of all the common homes.

When spring came, they would all bloom into life as one. The people of this town planted the spring seeds and awaited the thaw, as if praying for an early change in season.

As much as the town was covered in snow now; come spring, it would be similarly adorned with flowers. Just how beautiful would it be?

“I like this town in spring. Even from the windows up here, you can see flowers blooming everywhere. The white walls of the houses are covered in flowers too. When the snow melts away, the streets come

to life with people as well. The whole place becomes brighter. I've always loved seeing this town like that."

Camilla couldn't tell what kind of expression Klaus was making with his back turned to her. She wasn't even sure that he was talking to her at all.

Perhaps Klaus wasn't really expecting Camilla to say anything in response. In fact, he might not want to hear one at all. Maybe the only reason he brought Camilla along was because he didn't want to feel as if he were speaking to a wall.

"If this place becomes another mining town, the flowers won't bloom anymore. Uncle and Franz are obsessed with excavating as much as possible. Flowers are weak and unbecoming, apparently not fit to represent the pride of the Lörriich family. My uncle has always been pushing to make this place more like Einst."

The modest and taciturn town of Einst. A town that resembled a barracks, obsessively ordered where people lived and worked like a regiment. They would follow the orders of their leader to the letter; left, right, left.

Camilla had learned that all the townspeople of Einst still retained their own beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. But the impression others still had of the town was one of a monolith, where the people were equally made of stone.

"The people in this town just won't go for something like that, y'know? You saw it in the young musicians you met, right? How they're still hiding and playing despite everything? When people try to ban them from doing something, it only makes them want to do it more. Even if there might be trouble if the truth comes out, I don't think it's such a bad thing to go against these taboos."

"...Quite."

Camilla spoke, though she wasn't sure that he had heard her.

Those people they had met in town, Klaus' 'teachers' from all different ages and walks of life, had embodied that rebellious ethos. It couldn't have been a coincidence that they only ran into Klaus' teachers like that. Perhaps, most of the people in this town had taught Klaus something over the years.

What's more, those young musicians... Even though they feared the repercussions they might face from the vigilantes if they were caught, as far as Camilla could recall, they didn't seem to have any guilt or remorse over actually breaking the traditions at all.

"Making this place look like Einst must seem like an easy thing to do if you're sitting up in an ivory tower, but that shoe just doesn't fit. When you let people in this town live as they please, great things can happen. The whole perfume industry here started as someone's hobby, after all..."

As Klaus' words trailed off, he stared up at the roof. Those twinkling manastone lamps illuminated the brown curls of his hair.

"This town... I don't want it to change."

"If that's how you feel, then you ought to claim the succession."

Camilla placed her hand on her hip as she stared at Klaus' back. He just continued looking at the roof in silence, not giving her any response.

But, Camilla felt frustrated just listening to his complaints without offering any sort of solution.

"You are the eldest son, are you not? And Gerda is backing you, yes? If Baron Lörriich hasn't yet decided on his heir, then you have more than a good chance."

"Father wishes to have Franz inherit his title. In fact, he has been raising Franz as his heir since he was a kid."

"Why on earth would he bring up the second son as his heir from the beginning?"

In Sonnenlicht, inheritance was usually decided by the right of primogeniture. Although it wasn't the law, it was seen as common sense to raise and educate the eldest child with the intention of having him inherit his father's titles and land. Any young brothers born afterward were, to put it bluntly, a spare. It was only in cases where the older brother is useless or a miscreant, the younger brother is some kind of genius, or some other reason where it wouldn't be logical to have the eldest sit in the position of successor, would the younger brother come to the fore later in life.

As Camilla asked the natural question, Klaus simply shrugged.

After a while, he finally turned around to look at Camilla. A bitter smile was plastered on that pale and thin face of his.

"I used to be quite sickly as a child. I barely had enough strength to stay on my feet, and I never left the estate because of how dangerous it would be to my health. That's why my father gave me this place, because I didn't have enough strength to walk all the way to see the flowers myself."

As a young boy, Klaus was so ill and weak that the doctors surmised he wouldn't see his tenth birthday.

That's why the family pampered and spoiled Klaus, whilst Franz received the strict education as the heir apparent of a noble family.

In order to raise Franz as an ideal lord, superior to the rest, he faced a severe regimen of classes and study every single day. The training was as strict as anyone could expect given the position he was being raised to fill. But just how did the young and exhausted Franz feel when he saw that older brother of his, who was indulged and spoiled merely for existing?

However, he would be the inheritor. Consoling himself with the fact that his older brother, Klaus, would one day die and secure him in that position, he carried on.

Yet Klaus, the boy who was supposed to have died, lived on.

After he reached the age of ten, when he was expected to pass away, Klaus in fact slowly regained his strength and vitality.

When he eventually became as strong as any other boy his age, voices started to come out of the woodworks recommending Klaus to once again become the heir apparent.

“Because I’m a genius, I can do things better than most people can. Even though Franz is ardent in his studies, I can usually learn something in half the time it takes him. When I was a young boy, people often said that I was brilliant for my age. I could figure out what people were thinking straight away, seeing through their politeness to understand their real thoughts and attitude. So... I do understand why there are people who support me in becoming heir. I wouldn’t be a bad bet at all.”

Camilla listened in silence as Klaus ended with a sigh.

She didn’t like it. As a person, Camilla felt far more sympathy for Franz’s position than Klaus’.

Having to see his brother pampered like that from an early age, then eventually threatening to rob him of his very reason for being... Camilla saw a parallel between Franz and Klaus’ problems and her own history with Liselotte.

Camilla just couldn’t understand what Klaus was thinking. She knew Klaus had his own problems which he was deeply troubled by, but Camilla couldn’t empathize with him and wasn’t about to offer insincere words of comfort.

“If I succeed though, what will happen to Franz? Just what will he do if the only thing he had been raised up for his entire life is suddenly taken away?”

He’d be bitterly disappointed. And of course, he’d despise Klaus. It would be frustrating. He’d feel like he was suffocating. Camilla knew those feelings all too well.

“That guy has a few things wrong with him and is a little twisted. He can only see himself in how he compares to others and doesn’t know about anything other than inheriting the barony. He isn’t the kind of person who would ever want to work under me, but I can’t see him doing well out in the world either. But since I’m a genius, I wouldn’t have any trouble finding a living anywhere. There’s no need for me to succeed the House.”

Saying that, Klaus suddenly clapped his hands together. Then with a laugh, he looked back at Camilla.

“Alright, that’s how the story ends! That Alois guy can just go ahead and endorse Franz as the successor. Thanks for listening to me drone on like that.”

As he said that with a frivolous laugh, Klaus began to walk back towards Camilla, who was still standing at the entrance. He spoke as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, but that smile of his still skewed strangely.

“Are you leaving?”

As Klaus made to leave in silence, Camilla glared at him.

Camilla sympathized with Franz. She couldn’t understand Klaus’ point of view, and in a way, she was envious of him.

– No, but that’s the very reason I can’t stand it.

“Hmph,” with an angry snort, Camilla’s mouth bent in annoyance. With her hands on her hips, she thrust out her chest as she spoke out to Klaus, who tried to go past her and leave.

“This story is not over at all. There is something that I want to say.”

Despite deeply yearning for something, he was taken lightly. He was pitied, then merely had it handed over.

In other words, treated as a fool.

What Franz is to Klaus, Camilla was to Liselotte.

Camilla hadn't merely been in love with Prince Julian, she had worked herself to the bone in a desperate effort to capture his attention.

In order to capture the eye of the Prince, she would push others out of the picture and use whatever means at her disposal to get close to him: her parent's influence, her own connections, as well as a few well-spun lies. In her quest to become the image of the Prince's ideal women, she picked out the most beautiful dresses, wore all sorts of finery, and spent untold hours applying powder and other makeup. She even kept tabs on whichever topics took the Prince's fancy so that she could study them as well, in hopes of catching him in a conversation.

And yet, Camilla's wish never came true. No matter how much she yearned for him, the Prince's heart belonged solely to Liselotte. No matter how much she dressed or studied to suit his tastes, it was Liselotte that the Prince sought after.

Frustrating. Frustrating, frustrating, frustrating, it was unbearable.

– Just why did you never look my way?

“Your position is what Franz wants above all else, isn't that right?”

Lifting her head haughtily, Camilla glared at Klaus.

“He made an incredible effort, and yet he still hasn't obtained it. But you're just going to throw it away because you feel 'sorry' for your brother.”

His brother was willing to become unsightly in his desperate fight for what he desired, yet Klaus was content to simply toss it aside. What was treasure in Franz's eyes seemed like garbage to Klaus.

“All you're doing is making a fool out of Franz and everything he's worked for. Not just being the head of the Lörriich family, but his plans for the future of this town and its people. It's like saying everything he's been working his entire life towards is worthless!”

Camilla paused to catch her breath.

If something was deeply important to you, seeing it tossed aside like trash would hurt. Yet being reduced to having to pick it up in someone else's wake, like a starving beggar, was equally painful. She had always wanted to win it herself. Her hopes, her desires, Camilla had always struggled to make them happen herself.

“No one would be happy to be given something like that out of pity!”

“...Really?”

Klaus slowly crossed his arms as he looked at Camilla.

It was hard to tell what he was thinking, since his expression remained unmoved. Klaus, and Alois as well, just why were both their faces so hard to read at times?

“Wouldn’t he still be happy about it? Even if it’s second-hand, it’d still be his.”

“It’s exactly because it is second-hand that he won’t!”

“If Liselotte had stood aside for you as well, the Prince might have become yours too.”

As he said that so calmly, Camilla’s words stuck in her throat.

If only Liselotte wasn’t there... She had often thought about it.

“You still love that Prince, right? Even if it were an unsightly victory, you would still want to be chosen, right?”

Klaus’ smile suddenly turned back into that usual teasing smirk of his.

Camilla felt like that expression of his was trying to goad her into giving up.

“If you really want something, you would take it no matter how it fell to you. If you wouldn’t take it, could you say you really wanted it?”

She didn’t know what to say back to him.

Camilla inadvertently let her eyes fall to the floor, as that question rattled around in her skull.

What if Liselotte had taken pity on Camilla and given up her position as Queen to her?

The Prince would mourn his loss, but Camilla could comfort him. One day she could become the first person on his mind, even if she had inherited the position second-hand. It would fulfil her desire and give her hope for the future.

– And, yet...

She asked herself.

If Liselotte had simply disappeared, could Camilla truly have become happy?

“You might hate it at first, but over time you’d come to be happy that it was given over to you.”

Klaus said that, as if he were staring straight into Camilla’s thoughts.

Frustrating as it was, Camilla couldn’t answer him back. Her silence was unknowingly confirming that his words had a hint of truth to them.

No matter what, his feelings wouldn’t have remained the same forever. Once the Prince eventually let go of his memories of Liselotte, Camilla would have been able to live together with him in bliss.

“I am a genius, y’know, so it’s not hard to figure out how people are feeling. What people want of me and what people want for themselves, they’re plain to see.”

Klaus laughed as he shrugged, as if this were all just a game.

She hated that laugh.

“So because of that, it’s easy to live up to everyone’s expectations. That’s why I play the fool. To meet everyone’s expectations, I’ll strike myself down. That guy, Alois, he’s the same, y’know?”

“Do not lump Lord Alois together with you!”

As she listened to Klaus tear himself down, Camilla yelled that out in anger. Even Camilla was surprised by it.

Realizing that she was being coaxed by Klaus, she lifted her head. Liselotte wasn't simply going to disappear. There were no 'ifs' or 'buts' about it.

In the first place, this wasn't about Camilla.

“Lord Alois is not a fool. Even if he may have been a fool in the past, he's different now.”

Using the word 'fool', he must have been hinting at how Alois used to look.

If you considered it like that, Alois was certainly a figure that people would poke fun at. Amongst the nobles of the capital, Alois was ridiculed as the 'Toad of the Swamp', something even Camilla was taken in by. Despite being a relative of the royal family, he was withdrawn and ugly, a person best left to fester in the shadows.

But, Alois was trying to change himself. He wasn't like Klaus, who was stuck in his role as the fool.

Unlike Klaus, he wasn't going to deny who he truly was to satisfy the mocking expectations of others anymore.

“...The only fool here is you. Everything about your younger brother and the expectations on you are just excuses.”

Camilla stepped forward, once more raising her head.

“Just what is it that *you* desire? Didn't you say that you didn't want to see this town change!?”

“...There's no way for both Franz and my own desires to come true.”

“This is not about your brother!”

Cutting off Klaus' words, Camilla raised her voice again. Even though it was Camilla who had given over to her passions, Klaus seemed to have lost the words with which to argue back. As Klaus grit his teeth, Camilla stepped forward again.

“What is it that you want to do!? Is the town important to you!? Or are you just going to give up!? If you can't make up your mind, then don't bother complaining to me!!”

Another step forward. As Camilla stood right in front of him, she poked at his chest, as if pointing her question right towards his heart.

“You have something that you want to do! So just go out there and do it!!”

Camilla's cheeks were flushed in anger. As she threw those words at Klaus, she was, in effect, persuading herself as well.

Liselotte never hesitated, as Klaus had. The thought of handing over her prize to someone else had never crossed her mind. Liselotte was serious as well. Just like Camilla, she would take what she wanted by any means.

Liselotte wouldn't step aside. Even if Camilla had begged and pleaded, she would never have given up her spot by the Prince's side.

"You know... You really aren't logical at all."

Klaus sighed, looking down at Camilla's finger that poked into his chest.

"You're the first person I've ever talked to about Franz like this. But somehow, you've managed to twist this conversation into being about my own desires..."

"So what!? Do you have a complaint!?"

"Nah. Thanks... For saying what you did."

As Klaus thanked her with a light voice, Camilla blinked in surprise. For a moment she thought she was hearing things as she frowned at him in confusion, but there was no mistaking those words.

She met Klaus' eyes, that had returned to their regular carefree selves.

"I guess a headstrong girl isn't bad sometimes, either."

"Ha?"

"Hey, I'm a way better guy than that Prince of yours. First off, I'm a genius, and at least for the time being, I'm still a noble. I'm a better catch than that blind idiot of a Prince, so just marry me instead."

As Klaus returned to his usual self, Camilla sighed deeply. She couldn't tell his jokes apart from when he was being serious again. If he was just making a fool of her once more, nothing Camilla could say would really reach him.

"I refuse."



“An immediate answer, huh?”

Klaus didn't look hurt, simply shaking his head slightly. That's why she was able to reject him so immediately.

“Of course, that's only natural. Such a half-hearted marriage proposal, such a thing isn't even worth thinking about.”

“Oh? I thought it was a pretty good and serious one, though?”

It was hard to see just what true thoughts hid behind Klaus' smile.

A typical flirty smile... there couldn't have been anything deeper to it. Something about it worried Camilla though, a crease forming between her brows as she frowned. She had responded to him as if it was a joke, but if he were actually serious, then she ought to give him a real answer.

“In that case, I *categorically* refuse.”

Camilla spoke firmly.

“If that's truly how you feel, it would be cruel of me to give you any false hope.”

“...Not even a second thought, huh?”

Klaus sighed as he muttered that, wishing she would have at least looked a little flustered about it.

70

The sound was short, but it came through clearly.

As that short note rang through the cold cellar, everyone's faces lifted as one to look at its source.

"Wow...! A sound! A sound came out properly!!"

It was Finne, the girl holding the flute, who raised a cry in happiness.

Her face was a mixture of shock and pure, unbridled joy. It was as if she really couldn't believe that she had made that sound herself.

"That's amazing, Finne! I always knew you could do it!"

Otto was the first to give praise as Finne yelled in excitement. Otto, just like Finne, was practicing with a wind instrument. The sound Finne had made was like a beacon of hope to him, since he was still struggling with his oboe.

"Nice going. That flute really sounded nice, huh?"

Dieter clapped his drumsticks together instead of his hands. The sound they had just heard from Finne's flute was nothing like what they had heard up until now, which were more like the sounds of a dying cat caught in a pipe.

"Congratulations, Finne."

Verrat clapped her hands to match Dieter's sticks. When she finished, the corners of her lips bent in a subtle smile that suited her perfectly.

"Finne, that was fantastic! Maybe you're actually a musical genius!?"

Yet, even Verrat and Dieter's applause was drowned out by Victor's enthusiastic shout. Somehow, he seemed even happier about it than Finne.

Those young musicians kept excitedly praising Finne, even cheering her name. Finne hugged her flute tightly as she smiled bashfully, her cheeks a deep shade of pink. Still, the applause kept coming. The happy cheers echoing around the cellar.

And yet...

"All she did was play one note!"

Camilla yelled at the joyous young musicians who were close to rioting over a single little sound.

All that Finne did was blow correctly on the flute once. What's more, it was little more than a short peep.

Though it's true that they hadn't been able to make a proper sound at all up until now, that everything that came out of their instruments had been akin to musical torture, but they had gathered to play music, songs. Despite that, they were going wild with joy over just one measly note.

Otto could barely make a sound, whilst Victor hadn't figured out how to tune his violin. Dieter didn't know how to adjust his power to hammer out notes on his drums and Verrat had no idea how to sing from her stomach. In fact, Finne was the only one who had made any progress at all, even if it was just a single sound. That might be the case, but...

"There is still a long way to go..."

Standing alone, Camilla rubbed her temples.

○

A few days prior. Ever since encountering Klaus on that snow swept balcony at night, Camilla had been making frequent trips to that underground cellar.

She had various reasons to go, but first and foremost amongst them was the same reason that Klaus also went there. He wanted to teach those five musical rebels just how to play properly.

"I've more or less got a feel for all the instruments."

Just like Klaus himself had claimed, he was quick to learn anything. She wouldn't go as far as to say he could play in a band straight away, but he was definitely already a decent musician. With his skills as they were, he would definitely be able to teach a complete amateur a thing or two.

According to him, another one of his 'teachers' in town had given him a crash course. It seemed like Victor's group wasn't the only gathering of musical rebels in this place. What a crazy town.

Klaus would constantly be out in town, so Alois would follow...likely for the purpose of monitoring him again. Since Camilla hated the idea of being left alone in the mansion, she decided to go along as well.

Therefore, the young musicians were getting used to Camilla's presence as well.

○

"Now, now. Let them have their moment, they really did get a sound out after all."

Klaus stayed his usual carefree self as he tried to settle Camilla down.

"They will have fun too, if they see they're improving little by little. And if they're having fun, they'll only want to improve more, don'tcha think, Camilla?"

Without having much to refute him with, Camilla could only groan.

The faces of Alois and Nicole, who stood nearby, went stiff with surprise.

Klaus had just called her 'Camilla' as if it were the most natural thing in the world. That was the first time the two of them had ever heard him speaking to her like that.

Recently, Klaus had come to call Camilla by name.

As for the cause of that, Camilla could probably guess. It was probably because she had heard Klaus' story that night after meeting him on the balcony. Ever since then, he seemed to have become friendlier with Camilla, in his own way.

As a result, she had been upgraded from 'you' to 'Camilla'.

In terms of nobility, Camilla still outranked Klaus. His attitude was still inherently rude if she thought about it, but at least it was better than being called 'you'. Besides, Camilla couldn't imagine Klaus ever calling her a 'Lady'. Even if he did call her 'Lady Camilla', she would suspect him of some kind of trick or biting sarcasm.

That's why, even though she was a little dissatisfied with it, Camilla decided to leave it be...

Those two, however, had no idea.

"What are you doing, calling my Mistress by such a familiar name!?"

It was Nicole who shouted out first.

Stepping forward from behind Camilla's back, she glared at Klaus.

"Even Lord Alois doesn't address my Mistress so casually! You are so rude!!"

Nicole's shout echoed through the underground cellar. Although Nicole's voice wasn't typically loud, her yell carried very well.

"Hmm," Klaus crossed his arms as he looked at her. It didn't seem like Nicole's anger had done much to sway him. He just stared at Nicole, his face as cool as ever.

"Just what is with your attitude!? Please fix it at once!"

As he heard that resounding voice once again echo out from that little body of hers, Klaus scratched his chin as if he was thinking about something.

"Little girl."

"Don't call me a little girl!"

"You're voice ain't half bad, is it? You cry out from your stomach and it doesn't look like you're straining your throat, either. You have good elocution, too."

"...Excuse me?"

As Klaus spoke in a completely unexpected way, Nicole's stood dumbfounded. Her anger faded away as she blinked in confusion.

Klaus didn't seem to pay any heed to the stunned maid. Walking over to Nicole, he took her arm in his.

"Have you ever sung before? Come on, you should set an example for Verrat."

"Eh, w-wait, me singing is a bit...!? P-Please listen to what I'm telling you!"

Ignoring Nicole's embarrassed cries, Klaus pulled her to Verrat's side. As Klaus dragged her away, Nicole looked back at Camilla, the one person who could save her.

"Mistress..."

"Isn't it fine? Have a good time."

“Mishtressssssss...!”

Camilla saw the kidnapped Nicole off with a smile. She felt a little sorry for Nicole, considering how serious she was, but hopefully she’d learn to enjoy some singing.

“Camilla. You seem to have gotten pretty close with Klaus, haven’t you?”

As Camilla waved to her poor maid, she heard a calm voice from behind her. That ever soft voice could only be Alois’.

As soon as she heard it, Camilla’s smile felt awkward on her face. Even if she was fine when Nicole or Klaus were around, it was still hard for her to stay calm around Alois when it was only the two of them.

“Lord Alois, I never gave Klaus permission to talk to me like that...”

“Ah, no, I’m not trying to blame you. I was just a little surprised, that’s all.”

As Camilla tried to explain herself, as if she had done something wrong, Alois quickly shook his head.

“I think it’s a good thing to have more people you can consider close, Camilla. Especially if you can talk to them like equals.”

The words he spoke to her were even softer than his voice. More and more, Camilla felt herself sinking back into those feelings.

Alois’ words weighed on her heavily. Alois’ kindness felt painful. Even though it was Alois speaking, in Camilla’s mind, those thoughts of Prince Julian remained.

As Camilla couldn’t meet his eyes, Alois grimaced. Although Alois’ expression looked gentle, there was something other than mere kindness in it.

“That said, I am a little jealous.”

Camilla didn’t raise her head to look at him. Because...she didn’t know just what kind of face she was making herself.

She’d forgiven Verrat and the rest.

Alongside Nicole or Klaus, she was able to keep calm.

She was even able to walk through a town where practiced hymns dedicated to the Prince’s imminent marriage filled the streets.

But whenever she found herself alone with Alois, the feelings of guilt were overwhelming.

– Why?

Why had she fallen in love with Prince Julian?

In her mind, Camilla asked herself that.

Why had she fallen into a hopeless love? Why couldn’t she respond to Alois’ feelings? Why couldn’t she reciprocate what he felt for her?

Just why couldn’t she have met him first?

A question that she couldn't answer wrapped itself around her head. Those dark feelings of guilt coupled with a suffocating rhetoric left Camilla's expression frozen.

For the time being, Camilla found it hard to smile in front of Alois.

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Even if Camilla made little improvement in her relationship with Alois, there was some success with Victor and his group.

Otto and Finne had gone beyond just being able to make sounds and could now play the entire musical scale in order on their oboe and flute. Dieter managed to adjust the power with which he was pounding out notes, and Verrat stopped straining her throat as she sang. Victor, meanwhile, had become able to play simple tunes on his violin.

Whenever any of them made progress, the entire group gathered around and congratulated the individual. Whenever one expressed having trouble with a certain part, they would all encourage the person to keep trying and do their best. Camilla came to realize just how strong the friendship between them really was. What's more, she understood just why Klaus was so intent on teaching them.

However, those peaceful days were fleeting as the reality they were avoiding suddenly reared its head.

It was a fine day without a cloud in the sky, though the chill in the air was enough to turn one's skin red. When she went out with Klaus and the others as per usual, Camilla noticed that the central boulevard was much noisier than usual.

Because of the biting winter cold, it was rare to see this many people on the streets. There was something ominous about the noise, those voices echoing down the street had a disturbing air to them.

When Klaus decided to go and investigate, no one argued with him as they all raced towards the cause of the commotion.

At the center of all the uproar was a group of armed and well-dressed men.

Next to the strong looking men, someone cried out. They recognized the young man who fell to the ground.

"...Victor!!"

Camilla's shout was swallowed up by the noise surrounding them. 'The poor thing', 'What an idiot, huh?', 'They're reaping what they sowed', 'No, this is going too far...'.

As she was surrounded by a swirl of countless voices, Camilla was stunned.

Just why were Victor, Dieter and Otto thrown on the ground like that? Otto and Dieter groaned in agony as they were struck over and over again by those men's fists. Only Victor wasn't being held down, barely managing to bring himself back upright. Because of that, she could see the bruises and cuts all over his face.

Stumbling backwards, Victor fell to his knees next to Finne and Verrat, whose arms were being held behind their backs by two other men. It didn't seem as if they had been beaten like the boys. Whilst being forcefully restrained, Verrat's head hung despondently as Finne cried in terror. At their feet, there were bundles of torn up and shredded paper... That could only have been their musical sheets.

“Franz’s vigilantes...!”

Klaus muttered angrily. The notorious vigilante mob directly under Franz’s control, the group that Victor and his friends had feared so deeply. They were incredibly strict when it came to enforcing Mohnton’s taboos and were well known to make public examples out of anyone breaking the rules.

They must have learned about what the young musicians were doing in the underground cellar. That they were playing music that was banned in this town.

– Just how were they discovered!?

Did someone betray them? That’s what Camilla thought at first, but she shook her head.

In the first place, there had been plenty of rumours about what was happening underground. They must have forgotten to close the door to the underground cellar, and a curious vigilante investigated the noise.

If someone had told the vigilantes about what was going on, the only people it could have been were the five musicians themselves, Camilla, Nicole, Alois, or Klaus. She didn’t think that any of those five friends would betray each other. Then, was it someone amongst Camilla’s group?

Alois had been asked by Klaus’ father Rudolph to monitor his son, after all. And since he was monitoring him, had he also given reports? Taking that into consideration, Alois was the most likely person amongst the nine of them to leak the information.

– No.

Camilla denied the possibility of an informant amongst them.

– Lord Alois would never do something like that.

Even if she found it awkward to exchange words or even be alone with him, she knew that he hadn’t changed. Camilla believed in Alois.

“S-Stop that! Stop it, please!!”

In the middle of all the furore, Victor’s scream rang out.

Camilla raised her head again quickly to see. At the edge of her vision, she could see Victor on his knees, pleading with the vigilantes. In one of the men’s hands was Victor’s violin. Grabbing it by the neck, he slammed it down.

The violin was smashed into the pavement, the hollow sound of the wood splintering against the pavement was harrowing.

Even before she heard Victor scream in anguish, Camilla had dashed forward.

“Camilla!?”

Alois’ panicked shout boomed from behind her. But Camilla didn’t stop.

“...What do you think you’re doing!?”

One of the vigilante men turned around to look at Camilla, who suddenly jumped through the surrounding crowd.

“Who the hell are... Wait...”

The man turned around and glared at Camilla suspiciously, then his eyes slowly widened in surprise.

“You’re... Lady Camilla?”

“Oh, have we met?”

“Ah, no, it’s just that you’re famous, after all.”

The man quickly tried to cover up his slip of the tongue.

Even if people knew her name, the common folk of Mohnton shouldn’t be able to recognize Camilla immediately. At the very most, all they should know about her appearance was that she was a young woman with stern features and raven black hair. Victor and the others had no idea who Camilla was until her outburst, after all.

“In any case, what exactly are you doing? I wouldn’t recommend getting involved in a messy affair like this.”

“Let them go.”

“Afraid I can’t do that. These people have violated the rules of this town, after all.”

As determined as Camilla’s words were, the man’s face stayed resolute. Even if he knew exactly who Camilla was, he didn’t seem to fear her. Was the reason he was so defiant due to the backing of whoever was pulling the strings?

“You are treating them as if they are murderers! What gives you the right to beat them and hold them to the ground!?”

“Disgusting displays of vice will eventually lead to more death than a maniac swinging around a knife.”

“Isn’t it just music!? What is so wrong about playing it!? You act as if they’ve broken some kind of military law!”

The man’s mouth bent as Camila shouted at him. As it stretched across his face, it took the form of an unpleasant smile.

“It seems that Lady Camilla has some understanding of these kinds of wicked vices, I see?”

“What did you say?”

“As expected of a noble lady who was obsessed with the vice of her own passions. Because of that, you want to protect people like this who are falling down the same path you did. You sure are kind.”

The man spoke as if he were praising her, but the scorn in his voice was obvious.

“However, if you indulge yourself in vices like this too much, you won’t be able to reach any sound judgments. So whilst I have nothing but the deepest admiration for Lady Camilla’s kindness, this town must deal with its own problems resolutely. Otherwise, we may run into some unnecessary conflict.”

“And what you’re doing is supposed to stop that!?”

“Yes.”

The man’s expression didn’t change as he looked at her, still holding the shattered remains of the violin in his hand.

“It’s only natural. Because in this world there are women who, drowning in their own manic desires of love, will try and drag innocent young men and women down into their depravity.”

“...What?”

“Despite all those innumerable crimes of hers being discovered, a certain Lady still couldn’t forget the person she yearned for so desperately. To try once more to steal away the love she insists belongs to her, she would even go so far as to pull the strings behind the man she was exiled to marry... Or, so the rumours go.”

Camilla’s name, who the man had inadvertently said in quiet amazement at the beginning of their exchange, suddenly spread through the throng of onlookers.

Camilla Storm.

A despicably evil woman who attempted to ensnare Prince Julian and tormented the pure and innocent Liselotte.

An awful human being who was exiled to Mohnton as punishment for her crimes.

Like rippling waves, murmurs of Camilla’s name lapped throughout the assembled crowd.

“...Are you talking about me?”

“Oh, no. I was just reminiscing on an old story I heard while doing the rounds. Or, perhaps, do you know more than I?”

As the whispers swirled around behind her, she felt the blood rushing to her head. She felt a deep sense of anger and humiliation.

Certainly, the man hadn’t expressly said that the person he was talking about was Camilla herself, the woman who stood in front of him. All he had mentioned were the vague points that could be affixed to any number of dramas about love and regret.

If she argued against him, she would all but affirm it in the eyes of the crowd. If she stayed silent, she would be playing into this man’s hands.

“Before that woman fell to ruin, she should have given up on her disgraceful attempts at love. This is the same. For the greater good, we must give up these forbidden vices.”

The onlooking crowd had gotten bigger. Alois was somewhere amongst it as well. When Camilla remembered the last time she had spoken out about how she couldn't give up on Prince Julian, how it had hurt Alois, the words she wanted to rebuke the vigilante with were stuck in her throat.

Even though the shame and rage billowing inside her was almost unbearable, with that thought in mind, that strange sense of self-control restrained Camilla.

"To give up both obsessive love and repulsive vice is most befitting a wise person. Wouldn't you agree, Lady Camilla?"

– As if I could give up...

Camilla clenched her fists. She glared at the man as she chewed her lip, but she didn't say a word.

If Alois weren't here, Camilla wouldn't have held back. There wouldn't have been any need to suffer the ignominy this man was causing her, nor would she feel any remorse for still clinging onto the love she felt for Prince Julian. She would have stuck out her chest and told him exactly what she thought.

But, with Alois on her mind... She looked back towards the crowd behind her.

She found herself looking for Alois...but he wasn't there. Looking back from where she had left Alois, she could only see Klaus and Nicole's worried faces.

– Lord Alois?

The question that came to her mind vanished as soon as it appeared.

Just where was Alois? Camilla didn't need to look for him at all.

"Don't you dare say another word to her."

Camilla felt a hand on her shoulder.

As she felt herself being pulled back, a familiar shape stepped in front of her.



“Let them all go as well. I will not forgive anyone committing violence in this town.”

“This time... Lord Alois, is it? I didn’t see you amongst the rabble.”

The vigilante’s face stiffened up as he said that. It seemed as if he was fine dealing with Camilla on her own but going against the Lord of this land was beyond him. The other vigilantes seemed to be daunted

as well, loosening their grips on the young musicians. Dieter and Otto timidly raised their heads, anxiously watching the scene unfolding in front of them.

“In the first place, we’re not committing violence, we’re simply meting out proper punishment to those who broke taboo. You needn’t involve yourself. Blume’s matters should be settled by those of Blume themselves.”

“I can’t accept that. Blume is part of the Duchy of Mohnton. Above all else, I cannot forgive the fact you insulted her.”

As Alois said that, he stepped forward to shield Camilla. As if he were losing his cool, the man shook his head. He must not have expected Alois to come to Camilla’s defense.

“I would never dream of insulting Lady Camilla. I was merely talking about the stories that everyone has heard... Or Lord Alois, do you too believe that Lady Camilla, who may eventually be your wife, still has feelings for only Prince Julian?”

The man sought to speak Alois into a corner. If Alois admitted that here, to the public it would be the same as confessing that he was a pathetic and cuckolded man, marrying a woman who loved another. Of course, loveless marriages were not a rarity in this country, but it would be the height of shame for a nobleman to admit to that.

Alois turned and glanced at Camilla behind him. Seeing Camilla still incensed and glaring at the man from around his back, Alois sighed.

“That’s right,” he said.

“Despite being exiled from the royal capital, she still hasn’t forgotten His Highness, because she is a passionate and loving person. To condemn her for that would be the same as denying her heart.”

“Are you seriously saying that, Lord Alois...!?”

The man muttered in abject shock. The eyes with which he stared at Alois were filled with utter disbelief.

Going by all the rumours, Camilla was an evil woman. Even after being exiled to Mohnton, she was selfish and petty, delaying marrying Lord Alois because of how much she reviled his appearance. She also had a terrible reputation amongst the servants.

The man just couldn’t understand why on earth he would stand up for such a despicable woman like her.

“As for not being able to toss aside an unrequited love, I am the same. Going by your words, I too am guilty of indulging in that same vice, correct? Then if there is a punishment to be meted out, then I ought to be punished as well.”

“That’s impossible, to punish Lord Alois is...”

“In that case, release them all.”

“Guh,” the man groaned, but as disgusted as he looked, he nodded. The other vigilantes turned their eyes to the man whose head hung low. It seemed as if he was the leader of their group.

The man glowered, closing his eyes. Then, after taking a deep breath, he raked out a humiliated voice.

“...Just as he said, let them go!”

When the man said that, the vigilantes let all their captives go.

○

After the vigilantes left, the crowd gradually dispersed.

“...Umm, thank you very much...”

With a haggard voice, Victor bowed in front of Alois and Camilla.

There were multiple cuts and a deeply discoloured bruise ruining the cheek of that handsome young man. It wasn't only Victor who had been beaten though, Dieter and Otto were also injured.

“No, it's my fault for not helping earlier.”

“Not at all...”

Victor shook his head weakly as Alois tried to apologize.

His eyes trailed towards the broken violin, its shattered remains still scattered across the street. It had been completely destroyed, far beyond the point of repair. The strings were flayed and broken, fragments of wood lost in the snow.

“This was always going to happen. All we were doing is causing trouble for everyone, especially our families... We should have never started playing music in the first place...”

No one tried to argue with Victor's words.

Those five young people, some of them nursing their wounds, stared at the ground, their eyes hollow and cold.

Camilla didn't say a word to Alois.

After the five young musicians were released and went their separate ways, she still couldn't recall saying anything then. Nicole was worried, but she couldn't even summon the willpower to reassure her that she was okay.

She just wanted to be alone.

As soon as they reached the Lörlich mansion, Camilla looked for a place to be on her own.

Nicole would be in the room she was given. Who knows just who would find her if she went to the balcony again. Just where could she go in the mansion that no one would think to look for her?

The feelings inside her seemed to overflow more and more with every step she took.

Camilla knew just how it was that the world saw her.

Camilla knew that people saw her as a stupid woman, who obsessively fell down the path of a foolish love.

A love that would never come true for her.

Still, Camilla had pridefully stuck out her chest, confident in the belief that what she felt was true love.

But right now, Camilla was at her lowest point. She knew that her heart was standing on a knife's edge.

– Why?

Her body felt wracked with doubt.

– Why is Lord Alois so kind to me?

Camilla knew that Alois treated her gently.

When she first came to Mohnton, her view of him was a monstrously ugly toad, someone who would abuse and terrorize her at a whim. Yet after talking to him and getting to know him better, she came to know that he wasn't an awful man.

Alois would take care of Camilla. She would be much happier with him than fruitlessly chasing after Prince Julian.

She knew that.

– Just why couldn't Lord Alois have been the one I fell in love with instead?

But she couldn't change her feelings. The love Camilla had held for Prince Julian for over a decade was not something so easily undone.

– If that's the case...

She breathed out. Camilla realized that the heart which she had poured out in love was shattered, like the remains of Victor's violin in the snow.

– If that’s the case, I wish I had never been in love at all.

– I wish I had always been alone.

○

When Alois left Camilla’s room, Klaus stood in the hallway as if he were waiting for him.

“Yo. Camilla wasn’t there, huh?”

“I don’t know where she is...”

Nicole had told him that Camilla wasn’t in her room.

What’s more, Nicole seemed anxious that the usually animated Camilla had been so quiet and gloomy on their way back. But despite how worried Nicole was, Camilla had apparently gone off somewhere on her own.

“So, I guess you wanna meet up with her then?”

As Klaus asked him that, Alois lowered his eyes.

He was worried about Camilla and wanted to make sure she was okay. But right now, it was obvious that Camilla was avoiding him. She might end up in an even worse state if he suddenly met her.

What’s more, Alois felt like he had shamed Camilla in public. She was accused of being in love with Prince Julian and whilst she refrained from answering, he had jumped in and affirmed it.

Alois wanted to see Camilla. But Camilla probably didn’t want to see Alois.

“I wish you could see your face right now.”

As Alois looked at the floor, Klaus poked fun at him.

“I could never quite figure out what was going on behind that mask of yours, and I can’t tell you how much I hated that about you. Honestly, it’s like you didn’t give a damn about anything at all. You didn’t ever reach out to truly rely on anyone, it was like you didn’t care about what happened. Like today, you’d never have done anything like that before.”

“...Is that so?”

“You got involved in Blume’s politics, even advocating for the entertainment they call vice. No matter what you think, this is directly going against Franz and my uncle. It’s like you’re intentionally trying to fan the flames now or something.”

If Alois thought about it, he definitely wasn’t wrong. As it stands, it still wasn’t clear whether Klaus or Franz would inherit the family title. It was a reckless idea to get on Franz’s bad side, as he was a potential pillar of the Mohnton territory in the future. Even if it wasn’t intentional, using his own name in public the way he had would only create more enemies for himself.

But just as he obtains enemies, he might garner allies as well. Maybe that’s something he had learned from Camilla these past months.

“...If that’s the case, Klaus, maybe it would be best if you became the heir apparent after all.”

Saying that, Alois raised his head.

"I have no intention of allowing this kind of illegal 'justice' to continue, nor will I permit vigilante mobs to run the streets like this. If Franz becomes the head of the household, I will continue to be at odds with Blume. Blume will become much more unstable than ever imaginable. Therefore, you have to become the Lord here."

"I thought you might say something like that," Klaus spat with a frown, after hearing what Alois had to say.

"*Everyone* sure is keen to push everything on me, huh? They don't care about what I want, only what I can do for them."

"Don't say that. It's because I know you're a good man that I'm relying on you."

"Hearing that from you doesn't exactly make me happy."

Alois spoke honestly, but it only made Klaus frown even harder. With a deep sigh, his shoulders sank as he shook his head.

Then he muttered to Alois, a hint of anger in his voice.

"...Nothing for it, I guess. Well, I should have expected people to want to rely on a genius, after all."

Scratching at his hair with his hand, Klaus glanced at Alois with an upturned eye. Far from his usual playful look, his eyes looked spiteful, but there was something earnest in their depths.

"I'll tell you where Camilla is."

"You know where she is!?"

Alois almost choked on his words as he asked Klaus that in shock. Coughing slightly, he was embarrassed by just how loudly he had shouted.

As a Duke, Alois had confidence in controlling his emotions. Yet for some reason, when it came to Camilla, he found himself losing control more and more often as of late. Alois felt he had lost a little bit of dignity, exposing those emotions that he usually tried to keep under wraps.

Klaus looked uninterestedly at the bashful Alois.

"You're not too bad, are you?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Nothing. So, you want to know where she is, right? There aren't many places where you can be alone in a mansion like this."

Klaus' serious expression from a few moments ago was erased as a playful grim leapt to his face.

It looked as if he were about to mock Alois, but in the next moment, he said it without a care.

"Even if I went, I wouldn't be much comfort to her. Get going... Camilla is in a garden of mid-winter flowers, like a field covered in pure white snow."

Even as the sun dipped below the horizon, the greenhouse was illuminated as if it still hung at its apex.

In the centre of the greenhouse where a field of white flowers bloomed, Camilla sat alone, hunched over amongst them.

Klaus had said that this was his ‘secret hideaway’. So, she hoped that other than Klaus, no one would think to come here. That man, rude as he was, did have a strange sensibility about him. He probably wouldn’t be so thoughtless as to bother Camilla as she was right now.

At her feet, untouched bundles of beautiful white flowers bloomed around her. Looking at their lovely form, Camilla sighed. Maybe if she had been like these flowers, things may have turned out differently. Perhaps Prince Julian and her parents would have looked at her differently as well.

Even if she envied them now, it wouldn’t help anything. Camilla wanted to believe in her own pride. Yet still, she felt a pang of jealousy. Frustrating. Frustrating. Frustrating. She hated it all. Reaching out to a flower by her feet, she ran a finger over its petals. That flower she hesitated to crush in her palm, if only she could be like it... What a pathetic and miserable thing to think. Frustrating. She couldn’t think straight anymore.

Why did Prince Julian never look Camilla’s way?

Suddenly, a gust of cold wind rustled the flowers of the greenhouse.

The air was disturbed. She didn’t need to look, it was obvious that someone had entered.

“Camilla...?”

Camilla, half buried amongst the flowers with her back to the entrance, heard a hesitant voice. Then, anxious footsteps slowly approached her, one careful step after another.

Suddenly, those footsteps stopped just behind Camilla’s back. Just what could they say to each other? After a moment of silence, the person behind her opened their mouth.

“Camilla-”

“If you’re here to comfort me, please don’t. Even I know it already.”

Interrupting the words she didn’t want to hear, Camilla said that bluntly. If she had to endure being comforted by someone on top of all this, her misery would overflow.

“I already know that my love was shattered a long time ago. I should have moved on. Clinging to it like this, I’m a fool.”

Being comforted was miserable, but continuing the pursuit of an impossible love was heart-wrenching all the same. It’s no wonder that Camilla was ridiculed for never accepting her place. She was a girl who wallowed in a sad delusion, pinning all her hopes on being noticed by a Prince who wanted nothing to do with her.

“But,”

Camilla looked darkly at the flowers covering the ground, like a blanket of snow.

“If I could move on and forget about it so easily, I would have never loved him in the first place.”

She felt something move next to her. The person behind Camilla must have sat down as they watched her. Camilla didn't look to see, she simply stared at the flower between her fingers that she was toying with.

She stroked the petals, one by one, as softly as if she were patting a child's head. Even if she stared at the flowers, the only thing that Camilla could see was a vision of the past.

“I was only seven when I first met Prince Julian. When I visited the royal palace with my father and mother, I was in an awful mood.”

It was also the first time Camilla had been to the royal palace. The reason they had gone to the royal palace... It was for the funeral service of the Second Queen. An occasion where nobles and notaries from all over the country would gather to pay their final respects. Of course, there was another reason to gather as well. With so many nobles gathered in one place, there were many deals both virtuous and illicit to be struck as well.

The reason for Camilla's bad mood was because she had earned her parent's ire. But no matter how much they had scolded her, she still threw a tantrum. She remembered the reason why she had gotten on their bad side that day. It was because of the cookies that she had secretly hidden inside the sleeve of her dress.

“The day before, Diana... My lady's maid, Diana, helped me bake sweets for the first time. That was the first time I had ever made anything myself. I was really happy about it, so I wanted father and mother to try some. But...”

In most of the Kingdom of Sonnenlicht, cooking was not seen as a fit pastime for nobles. Her father glared at the misshapen biscuits that she offered him, whilst her mother had thrown away the one Camilla offered her, chiding her with the words ‘how vulgar’. So, she was angry.

The reason she had made them in the first place had come to nothing, but she still held onto them. She carried that trash in her dress like she was hiding away some treasure. She didn't remember exactly why she carried it like that. Perhaps she was going to throw it away somewhere where her parents couldn't see.

“That was when I met Prince Julian. I ran away from father and mother because I was upset, and whilst walking I saw a boy who was sitting in a shady part of the courtyard, all alone.”

A wind had whistled through the courtyard. She still remembered the cold feeling of winter that lingered in the breeze. Thinking back now, it had been a cold day. Unlike Mohnton, it didn't snow in the capital, but the leaves and flowers on the trees had withered away in the chill all the same.

“The first time I met him, I never realized he was Prince Julian. That was because his eyes were not red and his hair was brown, he looked like an ordinary boy. He only wore a single piece of finery... his funeral garb.”

Prince Julian had been born with immense magical power. Just with his eyes alone, he could charm the people around him.

So his mother, the Second Queen, had used magic to alter and fake his appearance. Using magic, she would change the colour of his eyes, the features of his face, and even the shape of his body. By blanketing Prince Julian in her own magical power, she prevented his own magical power from leaking. It had become a famous tale across all of Sonnenlicht.

“If I had known it was His Highness, I would never have been able to call out to him the way I had. But since he looked like a normal boy, I called out. ‘What’s wrong?’, I asked, since he didn’t seem well. ‘Would you like to eat a cookie?’, I said after that. Thinking back on it now, I was quite pushy.”

Camilla giggled slightly as she remembered that day. The boy had looked at Camilla in complete surprise. It was as if he couldn’t believe that she had called out to him like that, much less offered him a cookie.

– But...

“Prince Julian still took the cookie and ate it quietly. As for me, I simply watched him from the side. I had wanted to make something delicious, but it hadn’t gone well at all. In fact, tears had started welling up in His Highness’ eyes.”

At the time, she didn’t know why he was on the verge of tears. But, she knew now.

He was mourning the death of his mother.

“I was a little surprised, so I asked him, ‘Did they taste bad?’. But His Highness, even though he was crying, told me they were ‘delicious’. It’s a strange thing to say, but that crying face of his was so beautiful...”

The hand that was busy stroking the white petals of the flower came to a stop. Camilla’s shoulders trembled.

The person sitting down beside her listened in silence.

“I just kept staring at Julian, as he kept crying and eating my cookies at the same time. And as I watched Julian cry, so did I... I wonder why I cried then? Father and mother had always taught me to never cry. Ever since I can remember, I had never ever cried.” **[1]**

Camilla’s parents had forbade her from crying or whining. ‘There is always someone else who has it worse than you’ or ‘You are blessed to still have both a mother and a father, there are many less fortunate children out there’, they would say things such as that to her.

In truth, Camilla had been blessed. She had grown up used to acting selfishly, living in the lap of luxury. Despite that, tears were the one thing forbidden to her. She had grown up taught to be strong.

“I spent some time sitting next to Julian, crying like that. We hardly said a word to each other, but in its own way, that was fine.”

Trying to hide the quivering in her voice, Camilla let go of the breath she had been holding as if to stop something inside her from overflowing. She shook her head firmly as she blinked away the warmth pooling behind her eyes.

Then, she raised her head, looking at the face of the kind man who sat next to her.

“My apologies, Lord Alois. Even now I’m still just talking about Prince Julian.”

“It’s alright.”

Alois waved aside Camilla’s apology with a small smile. There was something so sincere in his gaze that she felt humbled.

“I don’t mind at all. Please go on... No.”

Alois said that, then shook his head slightly, that honest expression never leaving his face. He never took his eyes off Camilla. His silver hair, a hallmark of the royal family, shone even amongst that field of white flowers... It was beautiful.

“Please tell me all about your love.”

Camilla felt a deep pain as those kind eyes looked at her.

“I want to know all about you.”

Camilla’s breath stopped in her throat. It was suffocating. She had to break away from Alois’ gaze, her eyes moving towards the ground.

The heat returned to her eyes. The breath between her lips also felt hot. The white flowers were still so beautiful. The feelings that she hadn’t been honest with were violently trying to make themselves heard.

“I... I still love cooking.”

“I know.”

As Camilla squeezed those words out, Alois answered her gently. Her words were barely louder than the whispered rustling of the flowers.

“The only reason I could still love it back then was because of Julian. If it weren’t for Julian, I would have thrown those cookies away and never made anything again.”

If both her father and mother had turned their noses up at it and there was no one to appreciate her cooking, she would have come to hate cooking. It was after that day, the day that she met Prince Julian, that she truly came to love cooking.

“The reason I didn’t want to make any more sweets is that I only wanted Julian to taste them. I wanted the taste to stay the same as when we were children. I thought that if I made it again, maybe the taste would change. So, I decided I’d never make them again, except for Julian’s sake.”

“I see,” Alois chimed in. She hadn’t expected him to say anything, but she felt a little relieved when she saw Alois nod like that.

“But Julian completely forgot about it. It was just one day when we were children, after all. It was only natural to forget. It felt a little lonely, but I didn’t let it get to me.”

“Hmm.”

“Despite that, I remembered it well. It was the day I fell in love with Julian, after all. Even if he forgot, even if he looked at me coldly, even if he despised me, I still loved him.”

Alois nodded. His eyes reflected Camilla sat amongst a field of white flowers. The blooming flowers were beautiful. Alois’ eyes shone brilliantly as well.

“Even if he loved someone else, even if he sent me away, no matter what he did, I still loved him. I always loved him.”

Even though he joined hands with Liselotte and banished Camilla from the capital, she still loved him. She chased after the ideal that never turned to look back at her. Yet, although he never turned around to look at her, she kept chasing in the hopes that one day he would.

But, even she already realized it. Prince Julian never looked her way. Camilla’s love never came true. Nor would it ever.

“I loved Julian.”

She whispered. The whites of the flowers blurred in her vision. The tears finally formed in the corners of her eyes.

“I really loved him.”

Tears ran down her cheek. If they spilt to the ground, she knew that she wouldn’t be able to stop. Alois looked at her, neither laughing nor pitying.

“I loved... I loved you, Julian. I loved you. I loved you. I always loved you.”

A sob choked out from her throat. Coughing on her exhaled breath, Camilla tried to wipe away the tears with her hand. But as much as she wiped, they kept coming.

Her tears stained the field below, the drops of water landing on those white petals. In that white winter garden, Alois and Camilla were all alone.

“Julian, I always, always loved you...!”

In the midst of the flowers, Camilla cried out in anguish.



[1] From this point on, Camilla refers to Julian as ‘Julian-sama’, when she typically uses the Japanese for Prince Julian or His Highness.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky the next day.

With nothing to block it out, the winter sun lit up the snow-covered town. She could feel the warmth through her room's window, it seemed like winter's end was only around the corner.

It was only a month until spring. Klaus said that when it arrived, Blume would be awash in colourful flowers.

– I hope I can see it soon.

On the second floor of the Lörriech estate, Camilla thought that as she watched the town's morning slowly roll towards noon. Surely, it would be so beautiful it would make her gasp.

"Mistress... Are you feeling better?"

It was the first thing Nicole had asked her that as she came inside that morning to wake her up. But since Camilla had already woken up and was sitting by the windowsill, Nicole looked at her anxiously.

Camilla was a little surprised by how worried Nicole's voice sounded. Then, for the one maid who always cared for her, Camilla's mouth loosened slightly. Nicole had always been looking out for Camilla.

"I'm sorry, Nicole. I made you worry, didn't I?"

Looking back at Nicole, Camilla gave her a small smile. It contained Camilla's happiness for how much Nicole truly cared for her, as well as her embarrassment about having caused her so much stress. Just how much had Camilla been moping and sighing that she wasn't even able to realize it herself?

As Camilla felt her remorseful eyes once again trail to the floor, she quickly raised her head.

Right now, she had to stand tall and keep her eyes forward. Even if those dark emotions that spun like a whirlpool in her chest hadn't completely abated... She would be okay.

"Is it not just as you said, Nicole? For some time, I was certainly not myself. Don't worry, I will never be like that again."

"No, not at all!"

Holding her hands together, Nicole brought them to her chest, looking at Camilla with an expression halfway between relief and sheer happiness.

"So long as you're fine, Mistress, then I'm happy!"

Nicole's words that she shouted from her stomach were a bit louder than she intended, disturbing the quiet peace of the room. Her freckled cheeks suddenly became flushed with red, probably out of embarrassment at just how inadvertently loud that joyful yell of hers was.

As Nicole fumbled for an apology, Camilla laughed gently.

"Thank you, Nicole."

She was truly glad to hear Nicole's words.

○

Alois' recommendation of Klaus to the successor position of the House of Lörlich had caused quite a stir in the estate.

Beset with pleas and persuasions from the camp that regarded Franz as the best successor to the barony, Alois was so busy he barely had time to go out. On the other hand, a lot of the people who were only nominally on Franz's side suddenly came to pay lip service to Klaus. Rudolph, the current family head, was also exhausted from being constantly berated by Franz and his brother, Lucas.

As it stood, Gerda was probably the only person in the entirety of the Lörlich estate with a cool head. That's why, for the past few days, Camilla hadn't been able to go out much at all.

There had only been a single opportunity to go out to town. That was when she had asked Klaus to guide her back to that underground cellar.

That underground cellar where the five young musicians had once practised had changed completely.

All the musical instruments that lined the shelves and musical sheets that coated the floor had been cleared away, leaving the cellar looking barren.

Of course, none of those five were to be seen either. The basement felt even colder than usual when it was empty like this.

Surely, those five wouldn't come back here anymore.

They were beaten, humiliated in public, and even some of their instruments were destroyed right in front of them. It's no wonder that they seemed to have given up. In the first place, it's not as if they had any particularly strong passion for music. They really just wanted to have fun playing a wedding celebration song as friends. For such people, going on after that would be too much to bear.

And even if they had wanted to, it was certain that their parents would have other ideas.

All five of them had been fairly well dressed, considering they weren't aristocracy. What's more, they were educated enough to read and quickly understand the sheet music. It seemed like they all belonged to fairly well-established families amongst the common ranks.

For families of some social status, an incident like this can only be seen as an ugly blemish. Even if the residents didn't seem uniformly happy about it, entertainment like this was virtually forbidden in this town. Breaking that taboo could be squarely blamed on those five young people, it would make sense that their families would ensure they could never do that again.

Still, Camilla wanted to talk with them at least one more time. It would leave a bad aftertaste if she never met with them again.

But with her power alone, Camilla didn't know how she would be able to figure out where all five of those people lived in Blume. Alois and Klaus were busy as well.

There wasn't much Camilla could do, as those dull days continued to tick past.

○

“Yo.”

In a rare visit to Camilla's room, Klaus peeped out that short greeting as he stepped inside.

Even though he must still be busy, Klaus looked the same as ever. He walked with an easygoing confidence as he stepped inside, his brown hair sitting loosely on his head over a carefree smile. Nicole tried to look as intimidating as possible as he sauntered in like the breeze, but Klaus didn't seem to notice.

“Camilla, are you free right now? I want to go out to town for a bit with you.”

“Haaa?”

Camilla frowned as he suddenly said that.

“What's all this suddenly? Are you going to have me listen to your complaints again?”

Camilla remembered the time she had spent in the greenhouse with Klaus some nights ago. In the days since, his life seemed to have completely changed. Perhaps he had finally hit a wall and was mentally exhausted?

Well, Camilla also had a similar experience being taken care of like that recently. She wouldn't begrudge him a little complaining if he asked.

“No, no. It's not like that.”

But as Camilla wondered if he was depressed about something again, Klaus shook his head. He looked a little embarrassed about Camilla suddenly bringing that night up, but it did seem as if that wasn't why he had asked her.

“Let's just take a quick walk into town. I invited Alois as well. Well as for me, I don't mind if we go as a group or if it's just us two, Camilla.”

“Well, I mind!”

“Town? Why now?” Ignoring Nicole's angry yell, Camilla asked him that.

This should be the time where the two of them are at their busiest. Klaus shouldn't have the freedom to act like a playboy around Camilla right now since there were such a vast number of people who wanted to talk to him, as well as a number he would have to chase down and talk to himself.

Camilla welcomed the opportunity to go out to town, but she was a little wary about his intentions at the same time.

But just as Klaus usually acted, he simply shrugged as she looked at him suspiciously.

“It’s fine, I have time. I’ve got a request from one of my ‘teachers’, y’see?”

“Ah, right...”

As Klaus said that like it was the most natural thing in the world, Camilla sighed. He truly was the epitome of the prodigal son, after all.

Despite being embroiled in the middle of a simmering succession crisis that could boil over at any second, he still wants to sneak out and catch up with one of his ‘teachers’. Maybe Klaus was suffering from cabin fever even more than Camilla was... Wait, perhaps he had already slipped out to do one thing or another for his ‘teachers’ more than a few times already lately?

As Camilla stared at him suspiciously, Klaus winked.

The spitting image of the frivolous playboy, he put a finger to his lips with a teasing grin on his face.

“Recently, I heard something from my teacher who used to do a bit of composing... Apparently, people are gossiping about noises coming up from under the ground again.”

A hollow, high pitched tune echoed in that vacuous cellar.

It was intended to have a bright and cheery tone, but it ended up coming out quite lonesome instead. Even though she was surprised that she managed to play the tune until the end, even if it was a little poor, there was no one there to congratulate her or play alongside her.

Sitting all alone in that cellar, Finne's lips separated from the flute. She wondered just why she was here, practising fruitlessly all by herself.

There was no one that would hear her play anymore.

"Yo, you sure got better, huh?"

Then, from behind her, she suddenly heard an unexpected round of applause.

"Just when did you manage to play that tune till the end? Nice job!"

"It's still not nearly good enough. She's out of tune, her rhythm is all over the place and she never hits the highest notes properly!"

"Hey, come on now, one hurdle at a time alright?"

As that happy voice full of praise and the slightly harsher one critiquing her mingled together, Finne looked behind her at the source of those familiar sounds.

"Been a while, right? So I guess the true culprit of the underground noise this time was just Finne?"

The first person she saw was Klaus shrugging his shoulders. Beside him was Camilla, her eyes as sharp as ever. A little behind those two were Alois and Camilla's maid, Nicole, still making their way down the stairs.

Finne blinked in silence, suddenly being confronted with the appearance of people she never thought to see again. But rather than surprise or relief, the feeling that beat in her heart was excitement.

Suddenly, that cold and lonely basement burst into life.

○

Over the past few days, Finne had snuck out of her family's home to play once again.

"I haven't seen the other four at all. My family doesn't want me to see them either, they say they're a 'bad influence'..."

When Klaus asked her about what had been happening, Finne told him that with a sullen voice.

"Everyone else is probably in a similar situation. Victor might especially be in trouble since his fiancée Mia's house isn't very wealthy at all. I heard my parents discussing that maybe it was Mia who told the vigilantes where we were, maybe everyone else's parents think the same thing..."

“What a farce.”

As Camilla frowned, Finne nodded sadly.

“We started doing this because we wanted to, right? But because it was for the sake of Mia’s wedding, our parents suspect her. Apparently, they’re even talking about the engagement being annulled. Or at least, that’s what my parents said...”

Hearing that unpleasant story, Camilla’s glare deepened. She didn’t find the irony of a marriage being put in jeopardy because of a band practising a song to celebrate it amusing at all.

“We really should have stopped when Mister Klaus found us out after all... We should have understood the danger.”

Finne wallowed in anger at herself as she said that, looking down at the floor. When Camilla first came to the basement, Finne was one of the young musicians who suggested that maybe they stop after all.

If they really had stopped back then, like Finne had suggested, they may not have ever been found out by the vigilante militia. The five of them wouldn’t have been censured, whilst Victor and Mia’s engagement wouldn’t be under threat either.

She understood her deep sense of regret.

But, Camilla still had a question.

“If that’s the case, then why did you come here to practice again?”

“...Eh?”

“It must not have been easy to find another flute like that. What’s more, if you’re found out again, you might not just get away with a scolding this time either.”

Even if her ‘crime’ was written off as a ‘flight of fancy’ the first time, there would be no such leniency the second time around. Even worse, Finne was actively deceiving her family in coming here. If she was discovered again, she might have her freedom taken away for good by being married off somewhere or confined to the family home.

“That’s... That’s right, isn’t it...?”

The way Finne looked as she said that, it was as if she only realized just how strange her actions were after Camilla mentioned it. She blinked a little, stupefied, then hugged her flute close to her.

“Just why is it... I feel like I can’t let it go. How happy I felt when I first managed to make a sound... Just how much happy everyone looked when they praised me...”

The first time Finne managed to blow a proper tune on her flute, her friends had cheered and clapped, gathering around her with big smiles on their faces. Camilla had dismissed it as ‘Just making a single sound’, but for Finne, it was much more than that.

Camilla felt a sense of discomfort remembering what she said as she quietly watched Finne. There was no one here to praise her like that anymore. Camilla had even argued against the words of praise that Klaus had offered just before.

“...Hey, just one more time, please play that tune for us. That sound of yours, I don’t hate it at all.”

“It’s not good.”

Finne was a little surprised at those words, but she still mumbled in self-derision. Seeing such an awful expression of self-loathing on the face of that quiet girl, Camilla inadvertently felt uneasy.

But, then she sighed with that signature tone of impatience.

“Good or bad, it does not matter. I simply think it’s sad that there’s a song that goes unheard, so play it for me, if you would.”

As Camilla returned to her haughty self, a small smile returned to Finne’s face. “Thank you very much,” she said, before lifting the flute she had been hugging to her chest.

Closing her eyes, Finne held it to her lips.

A sad and lonely tune, wrapped in an awkwardly played melody, once again echoed through the cellar.

But, when she said that she didn’t hate that sound, she wasn’t lying.

That honest sound, coming straight from Finne’s heart, Camilla didn’t think it was bad at all.

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Finne's lonely melody was interrupted by the voice of someone who couldn't read the mood at all.

"...Woah, Finne!? I thought I heard something, but that was you!?"

Hearing that sudden voice, Finne stopped playing and took her mouth of the flute out of pure surprise.

Looking up, she saw a familiar young man making his way down the stairs.

Looking slightly bashful as he made his way down on nervous steps, the slender youth looked back at her. Taking off the leather bag he had strapped over his shoulder, he bounded down the rest of the steps.

"Otto!"

Finne raised her voice in stunned disbelief. Otto looked a little embarrassed as he met Finne's shout with a 'hey'.

"Mister Klaus and everyone else as well? What the, I thought I would be the only one here for sure."

Otto smiled as he went over to the corner of the cellar that had once always been his during their practices, with an equally practiced jaunt. Without any ceremony to greet that spot he hadn't seen in a while, he took out his instrument and waited.

But, Finne didn't lead him off like usual. For the last few days, she had been playing in the cellar all on her own.

"Otto, why? I thought that nobody was ever going to come anymore...?"

"Ha? And let you get such a big head start again!?"

Those competitive eyes glared at Finne. But after saying that, Finne just looked confused, so Otto scratched his head.

"You were the first to play a proper sound, the first to play the whole scale, you're always ahead of us. That's why I wanted to get back here as soon as I could sneak out. But even though I did, you even beat me here..."

Finne blinked in surprise as Otto pouted at her. She raised her hand to her mouth as she trembled a bit. It looked like she was struggling to contain her laughter.

However, before Finne burst into giggles, another voice interrupted her.

"Come on, Verrat, go inside."

"Dieter, wait, I don't particularly..."

A bright young man's voice and a hesitant young woman's. Verrat frowned as Dieter pulled her along by her arm.

Noticing Finne staring at him with her hands over her mouth, Otto scratched at his cheek as if he were suddenly a little flustered.

“Ahh... How do I say this, I saw everyone else go in before. I wanted to come in too, but I was a little afraid to go in alone, so...”

Dieter’s big body seemed to shrink a little as his cheeks flushed red. But even though his mouth struggled to get the words out, his foot lightly tapped out an impatient beat.

“I’m still worried about the vigilantes, but for some reason, I felt really restless. Before I knew it, I was hitting a bunch of things in my house to try and replicate the feeling.”

“You guys... Are all complete fools!”

Throwing off Dieter’s hand, Verrat said that as she crossed her arms. Looking at her from the side, Dieter grinned.

“Yeah, you say that Verrat, but haven’t you been hanging around here a lot? I’ve seen you constantly. I mean, I’ve been watching the place too, right?”

“Hmph!” Without denying Dieter’s words, Verrat stuck up her nose. Finne and the rest knew that even if she sounded annoyed, she just wasn’t being honest with her feelings.

Finne’s cheeks puffed up red with joy. Just how had that cold and lonely cellar become so filled with life again so suddenly?

“Oh, I was right after all, everyone’s here!”

The last voice that interrupted them from the top of the stairs was the loudest one yet.

“Victor, it’s exactly like I said!”

“Mia, w-wait a sec... Seriously?”

“Are you calling me a liar now?”

That excited voice belonged to none other than Mia, Victor’s fiancée. Looking down at the people in the cellar, she called back up the stairs happily.

“You’ll see if you get down here. At least be a little confident in front of your friends!”

As if unable to resist Mia’s request, Victor slowly and nervously began to descend the stairs. Fed up with how timidly he was walking with that large case under his arm, Mia gave him a smack on the back.

“Quickly!”

“Y-Yeah... Umm...”

Choosing his words, Victor looked at all the people in the cellar. Finne, Verrat, Otto and Dieter, as well as Klaus and the group that came with him. On that anxious face of his, there were still numerous small cuts that hadn’t healed and the faded remains of a black eye.

“Everyone’s here... To be honest, I didn’t think I’d ever see any of you here again.”

Victor bowed his head, letting the air out of his lungs. His shoulders sagged heavily as he continued to look down.

“All of this was just for my wedding, so I can’t tell you how guilty I feel. My father scolded me, but... I have to apologize for causing all of you trouble as well.”

Seeing how serious Victor looked, Finne and the others turned to each other in surprise.

“Trouble? But-”

“That’s why,”

Victor continued, cutting off Finne’s words. Laying the case he held down on the floor, he kneeled down.

Naturally, everyone’s attention focused on that case. That leather case, coloured an excellent shade of polished black you could imagine seeing your face in it, was unmistakably a top quality piece of work. The two buckles that held it down on either side were brilliantly shiny.

““If you get found out like that, you aren’t the only one who will suffer through hardship’, that’s what my father told me.”

Victor carefully undid the buckles. Then, with almost a reverent sort of showmanship, he slowly opened the case.

““So next time, make sure not to get caught’.”

As he lifted the lid, everyone wondered just what treasure could be inside such a magnanimous container... But, what was revealed was a well-maintained violin.

As he took the violin out of the case, Victor raised his head.



“This time, I’ll do better. I’ll make sure not to cause you all any trouble. So… Will you play with me again?”

The expression on his face was one unmistakably borne of Blume; fearless, but with a hint of mischief to it.

“Honestly... This town truly is ridiculous.”

Camilla had a wry smile on her face as she watched the six of them, including Mia, excitedly talk amongst themselves.

In the first place, the ruined diner above this cellar belonged to Victor’s parents. She thought it was strange when she heard that there were some old instruments down here even before Victor and the others decided to use it. Just where had those instruments come from, she wondered? Who had used this cellar before they had? If she thought about it, the answer was obvious.

Though, as ridiculous as this town was... she also thought it was an interesting place. It wasn’t just Victor and his group either, all of the people in this town seemed to be hiding some secret or another.

– I can begin to make sense of how Klaus came to be, seeing this town.

For better or for worse. As she thought that, Camilla looked towards Klaus, not saying a word...

But, she was a little startled when she saw the expression on his face.

Klaus looked utterly captivated as he looked towards those six.

Those usually frivolous and carefree eyes of his suddenly sparkled with some newfound passion. His cheeks were even tinged a shade of excited red. For some reason, Camilla found that sheer delight on his face a little envious.

“Honestly, I’m a little touched over here.”

Klaus said that to no one in particular.

Then, as if trying to calm himself down, he closed his eyes. It didn’t seem to do much good though, as he couldn’t suppress that smile on his face at all.

“It’d be such a waste to just hide away like this after all.”

“Klaus?”

As Camilla called out to him dubiously, Klaus took a deep breath. Then, with a big “HEY!”, he shouted out to those six.

“Since you’re all finally together, you shouldn’t be so caught up on ‘not getting caught’!”

Klaus’ voice sounded like he was really enjoying himself. But still... There was something almost dangerous lying behind those words. Just like Victor’s face had before, Klaus’ expression was a perfect mix of fearlessness and utter mischief.

“So what I was thinking was, why don’t we have a concert! That way, everyone can listen to you! In fact, let’s make it a commemoration of me becoming the successor! We’ll have a huge festival as well!!”

Essentially every single word that came out of his mouth ran contrary to Mohnton’s traditions. Even the usually mild-mannered Alois looked at Klaus with an uncharacteristically sharp eye.

Honestly, if the town was ridiculous, then this man embodied the very heights of ludicrousness.

“Klaus, just what are you thinking!?”

After returning to the Lörriich mansion on leaving the cellar, Alois confronted Klaus in his room.

“Do you actually realize just how precarious a situation you’re in right now? Yet you’re still sneaking out to visit people in town alone, and now this...!?”

Saying that, Alois rubbed his forehead. He felt like he’d grown wrinkles from the stress of the past week.

“Ah, so that’s the reason you agreed to come along today, right?”

But, Klaus’ kept his cool. With that relaxed expression of his not cracking an inch, he nestled down into his favourite lounging chair and crossed his legs.

It wouldn’t be hard to interpret that irreverent attitude of his as pure mockery.

“You feel responsible for getting me into this now, so if I happened to die it wouldn’t rest easy on your conscience. You sure are a kind and gentle lord, aren’t you.”

“Guh,” Alois couldn’t say a word. It was a bullseye.

Alois didn’t regret pushing Klaus into competing to become the successor. Even putting aside his personality and talent, it was natural for him to be in that position in the first place.

However, Alois’ decision had jeopardized Franz’s position, which he must have thought all but secured.

Alois, the Lord of Montchat, had made his feelings known. What’s more, the Baron Lörriich, Rudolph, who had little power to go against him would have to fall in line as well. In quite a stunning turnaround, it seemed like only a matter of time until Klaus became the heir apparent.

This change of fortune had been especially painful for Franz’s hopes of being the next head of the family, as well as for those who supported him. For some, it was too late to even go over to Klaus’ side. What’s more, Klaus had built up a reputation for being notoriously hard to please when his brother’s former supporters came to curry favour with him.

They would much rather have Franz in charge than the difficult to control Klaus. So, to that end, they had been coming to treat with Alois in the hopes of changing his mind nearly every single day.

However, there aren’t only the diplomatic sort who support or are subordinate to Franz’s faction. There are also those who would not be remiss to resort to much more direct and simple methods.

In particular, there was Lucas, the uncle of Franz and Klaus who was obsessed with his ideal of the monolithic personality of Einst. He was the kind of man who wouldn’t balk at using force.

– And if that’s the case...

“Why are you going to such lengths to stand out, then? And this ‘Successor Selection Festival’ only sounds like a huge provocation to me.”

“Well, yeah? It is meant to provoke, after all.”

As he said that like it was just a matter of course, Alois felt like those premature wrinkles had doubled.

“If things keep going the way they are, I’ll have to watch my back throughout the entire year. So, why don’t we settle this with one big bang?”

“You are honestly... the most reckless man I’ve ever met.”

“Hey now, that’s not true. Unlike you, I do actually value my life. I’m giving this proper thought, y’know.”

“But...”

‘Proper thought’ won’t protect him from a knife between the ribs. His enemies were in this very house. No matter what he did or where he went, chances are he was being monitored.

What’s more, the vigilantes were still a major problem. The people they had rallied to their side in and around the Lörrieh household were more known for their brain than their brawn. It would be impossible to win in a straight up battle against Franz and Lucas, who still controlled the vigilante militia.

But despite Alois’ worry, Klaus laughed through his nose. “It’ll be fine,” he said with a fearless smile, tapping the side of his head.

“Don’t worry too much. I’m smarter than you are, so I’ll figure it out.”

From a minor noble to the Duke of the territory, Klaus’ words really were far too arrogant and disrespectful.

But, for some reason, they were also oddly persuasive.

After a moment of silence, Alois sighed as if he had given in.

“...Yeah. It’s just as you said.”

Alois grimaced a little bit as he said that.

Rubbing his temples at the lunacy of it all, he shook his head. Alois didn’t feel the weight of those wrinkles anymore, though.

“I believe in you, Klaus. Just tell me what I can do to help.”

“You sure about that? I might just squeeze you dry?”

Even though Klaus teased him, Alois nodded earnestly.

“That’s not a problem, but...”

For the first time in their conversation, Alois took his gaze off Klaus. He wasn’t looking at anywhere in particular. If he were forced, he would say he was looking back at the cellar. Back at his memory of just how Camilla had looked.

“If you really are going to plan a festival, don’t plan on ruining it. It would discourage Victor and the others... Besides, it seems like she’s really looking forward to it too.”

“For other’s sake, you...?”

Klaus breathed out, his expression a mixture of confusion as well as astonishment.

○

Camilla meanwhile, not knowing anything about the exchange between the two men, was in high spirits.

It had been such a long time since she’d last seen a festival. Since Mohnton had a strict taboo on things like fairs and festivals, she hadn’t seen one since she was back in the royal capital the better part of a year ago.

She wasn’t wholly sold on the idea of a festival organized by and dedicated to Klaus, but so long as she ignored that part she felt like she would be able to have fun all the same.

The occasions that were celebrated in the royal capital were held to mark the start of the vernal equinox as well as the harvest festivals. Not to mention a celebration of the royal family’s history on the birthday of the ruling monarch.

The celebrations surrounding the monarch’s birthday were a little stuffy and formal. It is usually centered around military achievements of both the current king and his ancestors, so everyone in attendance has to follow strict decorum. There was a tourney held in an open square, as well as a competition for blade dancing. Both of these were restricted to men, however.

There were other smaller festivals that were held for the birthdays of other monarchs, however, and these were usually lighter affairs. Camilla especially liked the celebrations that were usually held for the women of the royal family, such as the Queen. On the birthday of a female member of the royal family, she would have the capital filled with all of her favourite fancies. If she loved singing, tenors would stand on every street corner. If she preferred dancing, the entirety of the business district would turn into a massive ball. The town would be beautifully decorated and awash in colourful flowers and streaming cloth, creating a wondrous atmosphere.

Of course, young noblewomen like Camilla wouldn’t be permitted to go out and join the common people in their raucous festivals all over town. She would always have to watch their festivities from the window of the carriage, feeling a deep sense of envy as they trundled on towards the royal palace, the laughter, and cheers echoing in her ears.

Of course, there would be a festival taking place at the royal palace as well. Since the center of attention whose birthday was being celebrated was there, one would be able to greet them and give their sincere best wishes in person. It was a special privilege only provided to nobles to even be in the presence of the birthday celebrant.

But, despite the pomp and circumstance, it was still a strictly followed ceremony. She had to mind every step she took and every word she said since you could be sure that the other nobles were always watching.

But this time, Camilla could go out and enjoy a festival taking place in town.

She couldn't wait to see how much fun being on the other side of a celebration could be.

The territory of Mohnton had strict taboos against entertainment. When Klaus had proposed the idea of a festival, she had seen Alois frown at the word, but he hadn't forbidden it.

It almost seemed like he was ready to 'look the other way'. As the lord of the land, he wasn't going to interfere. In other words, they were given free reign to do as they like... Or at least, that's how Camilla saw it.

"Is a festival really such a fun thing?"

After they came back to the mansion, to Camilla who had been pacing around her room with a smile on her face the entire time, Nicole asked that.

Born and raised in Mohnton, Nicole had never heard of a festival before. The town of Falsch where Nicole was from was nestled deep in the mountains, with no entertainment making its way in from outside. There were no closeted hedonists like in Blume, so she never had an opportunity to see anything like this before coming here.

That said, it wasn't as if Nicole didn't understand the idea of 'fun'. It was 'fun' for her to talk with her brothers. It was 'fun' for her to comb and braid Camilla's hair. But, she didn't really understand the difference between that and getting wrapped up in true entertainment.

Camilla, who stopped humming a happy tune that Nicole looked mystified by, looked her way.

Seeing Nicole's confused expression, Camilla explained without wiping the smile off her face.

"It's incredibly fun. Just being able to watch is exciting. There are bands, jesters and all sorts of stalls selling food and trinkets lining the streets."

There were formal bands and entertainers like jugglers in the royal palace's celebrations as well, but there weren't any food stalls, since the palace prided itself on providing fancier cuisine.

Still, surely the festival atmosphere of the town would be more fun, free from the stuffy restraints of a noble gathering.

"And everyone is enjoying themselves. Surely, it would be fun to get involved in such a ruckus together as well."

It would be fun to organize that ruckus as well. She was having fun just imagining it. A town like Blume that was full of secret entertainers and hidden joys. If everyone could enjoy themselves without having to worry, then surely the atmosphere would be amazing.

– Just what do we need to prepare for the festival, I wonder?

For the stalls, she thought about asking the town's restaurants for help. The decorations around town would need a lot of flowers and bolts of cloth. She couldn't forget about the bands either, especially since they were the catalyst for all this. How about having a matching uniform made for Victor and the other musicians?

The more she thought about it, the more there was to prepare.

Finally noticing the huge grin that had spread across her face, Camilla shook her head and lightly slapped her cheeks in a flurry.

But, it wouldn't go away.

Just what do you need in order to hold a festival?

Flowers, music and food. Not to mention lots of stalls and stands.

“I guess I’m gonna have to rely on a bunch of people, huh?”

Klaus groaned to himself as he walked through Blume’s streets.

It was a clear winter’s morning. Just as they had been doing every day recently, Camilla was taking a tour of the main square in town alongside Alois, Klaus and Nicole.

The reason they were doing so was to make plans for the main area the festival would take place in.

The largest town square in Blume was asymmetrically designed, laid out in a strange shape with its east and west borders demarcated by flowerbeds. Because the majority of Blume wasn’t built on flat land, there was a series of steps that led down into square that came together at the base as a landing.

Along the outside of the steps, water flowed. Flowing slowly down the layered steps, the water eventually pooled into a fountain at the base where the bottom of the stairs all interceded. Even though the waterways were covered with snow now and the fountain was frozen over, Camilla was still stunned by just how beautiful the square was.

In the land of Mohnton, where entertainment was taboo and modesty was considered the highest virtue, people tend to avoid ostentatious architecture or clothing. That was clearly seen in Einst. Even in Blume, all the buildings and walls were uniformly painted white. There weren’t many eye-catching attractions such as this fountain.

However, in its own way, Blume was a beautiful town. Even though the buildings seemed uniform and without glitz or glamour, they all possessed a simple kind of elegance to them.

“Would it be possible to open stalls at the base of the square? It’s connected straight onto the main street and it would be simple to arrange the stalls neatly as well.”

As Camilla looked around the square with glittering eyes, Klaus calmly assessed the plaza. ‘Where would we put the band?’ ‘Just what pattern should the stalls be arrayed in?’, along with Alois, those were the kinds of serious topics they were discussing.

“After sorting out the food for the festival, there’s a lot of work that’ll need doing. We need a lot of manpower... Manpower, huh...?”

“We also need people to serve as security. Klaus, are the people from your house not useable?”

“Have you seen the people there who are aligned with me? None of them are exactly muscle heads. Well, maybe I could try talking to aunty about it.”

“Hmm...”

Alois crossed his arms as he thought. Although Klaus has become a powerful candidate in the emerging succession crisis, there were still quite a few people throwing their weight behind Franz and Lucas.

Especially those who count themselves amongst the vigilante militia. Since Lucas placed such an emphasis on military affairs, it only made sense that those supporting arms flocked to his banner. But as Klaus himself admitted, he wasn't truly compatible with military affairs. Perhaps having such people on his side wouldn't be such a huge advantage.

As Alois was lost in thought, Klaus shook his head.

"Ahh, stop overthinking things all the time! It's annoying!"

Klaus turned his head away from Alois, intentionally saying that quite loudly. Then abandoning what it was they were talking about in the first place, he waved to Camilla and Nicole who were wandering about the square.

"Let's go to the next place! We need to organize food and clothes, right! And flowers too!"

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"If it's about costumes, then I can make them."

After not getting the answer they were looking for from the restaurants in town, they eventually came back to the underground cellar. To Camilla, who had lost a bit of heart after talking to all the owners, Mia said that.

"Well, I can't do it alone, but I'm sure we can organize something if I ask my father. Our family make clothes for a living, after all."

As usual in that cellar lately, the five young musicians were practising with one another.

Now that they had Klaus' protection, someone with increasing power in town, there wasn't anyone who would disturb their practice sessions. Even if there were people who deeply disapproved, there wasn't much they could openly do against them.

Even the vigilante militia couldn't directly interfere, either. Since Victor's group didn't feel the pressure of having to hide away anymore, they could relax and play.

It would still be difficult to describe their performances as 'good'. At the very least, it resembled music now, unlike the racket it used to be. If they continued like this, when the day of the festival arrived, the townsfolk might actually be able to bear listening to it.

Meanwhile, Victor's fiancée, Mia, was keeping the five of them company.

She had played the part of the audience, brought them all food and supported them in any way she could, but it seemed she was a little lonely not being able to participate herself. When the talk of costumes arose, she jumped in so passionately that Camilla and the others were taken aback.

"I don't just want to watch, I want to be able to help everyone out somehow as well. If it's clothes, even if I can't read a musical score, I can help Victor and the rest, right?"

"Mia...! You're helping just by being here supporting us in little ways! But if Mia makes us costumes, that'll definitely make me want to try harder."

Hearing Mia's words, Victor who was sitting beside her as he took a break looked like he had found a second wind of inspiration. That expression caught halfway between joy and pride was heartwarming to see.

"If you've got time to say embarrassing things like that, then you've got time to practice."

Clapping Victor on the back, Mia cut off his honeyed words with her own curt ones. Even though it seemed cold, the smile didn't disappear from Victor's face.

Camilla sighed as she watched those two lovebirds.

"It would have been excellent if we could have sorted out the food problem as well..."

She bitterly remembered the hushed replies of the restaurant owners that they visited. It wasn't as if they were flat out rejecting any involvement, but it was more that none of the restaurants wanted to be the first ones to dip their toes in the water. It was the first time a festival like this would be held in Blume, so they couldn't anticipate the number of customers that would participate. What's more, they were worried that they would draw the ire of the vigilante militia just by participating. Also, any of the restaurants that expressed support for Klaus could go down with him, should Klaus lose out dramatically in the succession struggle.

It wasn't as if Camilla didn't understand where the restaurant owners were coming from. It was no easy thing to be the first one to take a leap of faith. She sympathized.

But, that wouldn't stop her from venting her complaints about it.

"Even though it's such a good business opportunity, they're all so cowardly and foolish!"

"Well, even if you say that..."

Trying to calm down the obviously irritated Camilla, Klaus kept going.

"Maybe if we brought along the Old ManHead Chef, things might go differently."

"Ugh," Camilla's mouth twisted. The 'old man' Klaus was referring to could only be the Montchat family's most senior chef. He had accompanied them to Blume, but Camilla hadn't seen sight nor sound of him for the entirety of their stay so far, like they were both perfectly avoiding each other.

Truth be told, he had been invited to join them for today's outing. But after saying 'I won't go if Camilla is there', he stayed back at the Lörriich mansion.

"Are you going to say that it is my fault?"

Not even trying to hide her dissatisfaction, Camilla pouted.

The reason why Günter was avoiding Camilla was wholly because of Camilla's earlier faux-pas. 'The one I love will always be Prince Julian!', after she said that, Günter, who had a deep respect for Alois, had been avoiding all conversation with Camilla.

Günter was the one who had been teaching Camilla more about cooking. Inside the Montchat manor, he was one of the few people that Camilla could speak comfortably with. But in this situation where neither of them spoke to one another, Camilla was left alone with her thoughts.

– It wasn't as if I was trying to hurt him.

However, people's hearts were delicate things. It wasn't a lie that she loved Prince Julian. Even if she had come to Mohnton as Alois' potential fiancée, it would be unreasonable to expect her to suddenly fall in love with him.

But, well, perhaps she didn't have to say it like that. Camilla realized she wasn't blameless. Thinking that way, she did feel a sense of responsibility about it. Thanks to that lingering debacle, the preparations for the festival had been delayed.

"Oh, you're looking down?"

Looking at Camilla, who avoided his gaze, Klaus laughed. Then, although it was difficult to tell whether or not he was trying to cheer her up or not, Klaus approached Camilla.

"It's alright, it's alright, don't worry about it too much. That Old ManHead Chef is just sulking, that's all."

"Haa?"

Camilla looked up to glare at Klaus, who had brought his face quite close. Startled by just how near he was, she tried to pull back, but Klaus pressed forward. Getting even closer, he cupped a hand around his mouth and whispered softly into Camilla's ear. He was extremely close.

"It's like he's sulking in Alois' place. That guy, you know he won't throw his toys out of the pram, even when he's like that!"

As he said 'that guy', Klaus' eyes shifted to look at Alois. As if taking Klaus' invitation, Camilla also glanced at Alois.

"He's not getting angry. He's hardly complains at all either. Even when someone confronts him with something unpleasant, how often does he just sit there with a smile and take it? Even when the woman he likes is this close with another man?"

Alois seemed to finally have noticed Camilla and Klaus' eyes on him. Seeing that the two of them were close enough that Klaus could whisper in her ear like that, Alois blinked in surprise. But then, his expression changed to one of a bitter smile as he spoke out to them.

"Is there something on my face?"

"You see?"

As Alois called out to them gently, Klaus laughed mockingly. Gracefully avoiding Camilla's hand as she tried to push him away, he left her to go and help Victor and the others with their practice.

As Klaus left, Alois approached in turn. As he watched Klaus leave, there was a slight frown on his face.

"Was he bothering you?"

"...No."

Camilla's answer was rather quiet as she looked at Alois. She was annoyed at Klaus, who was running his mouth like that... But she couldn't deny his words.

It was very rare to see Alois lose his temper. Sometimes he would raise his voice. Other times he might use strong words. But rather than getting genuinely angry, it was closer to scolding someone out of worry.

At times, she had seen him full of joy. At other times, deeply aggrieved. She knew for a fact that he wasn't cold and emotionless.

But, there was something on Camilla's mind.

"Lord Alois, ah... It doesn't bother you at all? Seeing Klaus and I like that?"

Like that... In other words, what some bystanders might call 'intimate'.

Klaus was clearly only doing that on purpose to prove his point about Alois, but he had gone too far. Camilla and Alois had never been intimate to the point of being able to whisper in each other's ears. Of course, she hadn't given Klaus permission to do that at all and was still angry about it, but she would have to chastise him later.

"Ah..."

Alois' smile seemed to widen a little at Camilla's words.

It wasn't a smile of joy or any sort of happiness, it was a smile that betrayed no feelings.

"I think it's a good thing to have such close friends, Camilla."

Alois kept smiling as he said that, his voice soft and calm.

There was something about that attitude that Camilla couldn't be satisfied with.

An attitude that tried to be gentle to everyone, never seeking to hurt their feelings. Trying not to put whoever he is talking to in a tough spot. Whilst keeping what he really wants to say in check, he trots out a nicety, never airing his complaints or grievances.

Trying not to make trouble for anyone. As a person, it was commendable, but...

Camilla finally found the words to describe the distinct impression of Alois that she had held for some time.

– It's as if he's trying to be a 'good boy'.

After leaving the basement of the diner, Camilla was accompanied by Alois as they made their way to the florist.

Klaus and Nicole, meanwhile, were still busy in the cellar. Klaus was busy personally instructing Victor and the others, whilst Nicole was staying with him since Klaus wanted to use her.

Apparently, Klaus was determined to have Nicole sing. Nicole was a typical denizen of Mohnton and was hesitant about getting involved with this sudden new vice at first, but lately, she seems to have been swept up in Klaus' rhythm and they even seemed to be getting along a little better.

That's why, for the first time in a while, she was alone with Alois.

Just like always, she could hear the faint echoes of that detestable hymn on the air.

There weren't many other people trudging through the snow covered roads. As she walked alongside Alois, Camilla felt awkward, leaving behind a trail of footprints in the snow.

Blume was a town famous for its flowers and perfumes. However, since flowers were only really seen as an ingredient, its main export was the perfume. There weren't all that many shops that were specifically dedicated to floristry, and amongst those there were only a handful that Klaus pointed out as potential collaborators for the festival.

In the first place, it wasn't an uncommon opinion in this land that flowers, being so vividly coloured and eye-catching, were in themselves a form of 'vice'. Although people tolerated the flowers that grew in the flowerbeds and on the trees as articles of nature, there were those who frowned on florists displaying bouquets and wreaths in their shop windows.

Of course, it goes without saying that perfume is considered a luxurious item, but the perfume produced in Blume isn't typically sold there. The vast majority of it is exported outside of the territory, with it being an open secret that in Mohnton itself the products are only used by a cadre of high ranking nobles and wealthy merchants.

The point being, they weren't sold much in the public eye.

There was still a little ways to walk before they reached the florist.

As they walked side by side, it didn't seem like Alois was going to say anything either as the silence persisted between them.

Thinking about it, it was probably the first time she had been alone with Alois since the time in the greenhouse. She was acutely aware that the pitiful side of herself she showed to Alois must still be fresh in his mind.

After all, Alois had proposed to Camilla. How could he simply forget that the woman he wanted to think about becoming engaged to him was crying her eyes out over another man? In fact, Alois had often kept Camilla company when she had something to vent.

So, Camilla thought that she should sincerely respond to Alois' kindness.

“...Lord Alois.”

“Yes?”

Alois responded straight away as Camilla awkwardly called out to him. Although, seeing how bitter Camilla’s face was as she looked up at him, Alois seemed a little confused.

“Is something wrong?”

“Ah, well, you see? I thought I should thank you for the other day. I showed you something unsightly after all...”

“Ah, don’t mention it.”

With that answer, Alois’ gaze drifted. It was as if he was looking over the snow-covered town for some inspiration as to what to say next.

“I loved Prince Julian.”

“Yes. I know.”

“And when it came to marrying you, Lord Alois, I was against it from the start. Why should I have to live apart from His Highness? That was the kind of thing I was thinking.”

“...I know.”

Alois’ voice that responded to Camilla’s sounded unnatural, betraying no emotion.

It had always been plain to see from her attitude. In the beginning, Camilla refused to marry Alois. Although his appearance played a big part, there was also the apprehension towards marrying anyone other than Prince Julian.

“All I wanted to do was force them to regret. Not just His Highness, but all those who exiled me. To that end, I intended to use you, Lord Alois. So... I have to apologize for that.”

“...I thought it might have been something like that.”

Alois’ voice was quiet as he sighed. Then, looking back down at Camilla, Alois smiled as if to reassure her.

“So, that’s why you wanted me to lose weight? Somehow, I had an inkling.”

“You don’t hate me for it?”

As Camilla asked that, a note of trepidation in her voice, Alois calmly shook his head.

“It’s no wonder you would think that way after everything that happened, Camilla. Besides, it’s a different story now that we’ve gotten to know each other, isn’t that right?”

At those kind words, Camilla’s mouth felt like it tightened into a knot. Alois wasn’t angry, there was just a slight sadness in his eyes.

Now... Just what did she think? Camilla thought to herself.

Even now, Camilla’s desire to have Alois lose weight hadn’t changed.

Despite being much thinner than before, he was still overweight. His ruddy and pockmarked skin had improved considerably ever since applying the ointments and cream she obtained in Einst. She was worried that he would have constant rebounds through outbreaks of pimples, but surprisingly it was going smoothly. The food he was served was still horribly overseasoned, but at the very least Alois only ate a reasonable amount of meals these days.

She wanted to do away with that horrid salting and sugaring that ruined every meal so that he could enjoy truly delicious food again. She wanted to mold that excess meat of his into muscle. She wanted to finish clearing up his skin. She wanted him to wear clothes that were at least a little more fashionable.

That's what she thought... But who was all that effort for?

"Lord Alois, I... I have one more thing I need to apologize for."

Camilla's voice came out much quieter than she intended.

"This talk of our engagement. I would appreciate if you could wait for my reply for a little while."

As she said that, the sense of guilt pricked at her heart as she looked up at Alois, her face once again looking bitter. That face of his that looked back at her looked troubled, his brow slightly furrowed.

"In the springtime... His Highness will be married. Until then, I will reflect on it properly. About myself, and what I want to do in the future."

"Yes."

The hint of frustration didn't leave Alois' face as he forced himself into a grimace. Using that self-control he always exerted over himself, he didn't want to let his feelings show on his face.

"I will wait for you as long as it takes. If it satisfies you, Camilla, then please take as much time as you need to think it over. That would make me happy as well."

Those words rang hollow in Camilla's ears.

There wasn't a single hint of justified indignation in his voice. Just why was he so fine with Camilla selfishly delaying her answer, considering how selfish she had been up until now?

She wanted to be thankful... But it was stifling instead. As she felt weighed down by Alois' words, Camilla felt a sense of *deja-vu*.

Lately, when she looked at Klaus, she had thought that he was similar to Alois. This was the reason.

– They go too far for the sake of others.

Klaus had been intent on putting Franz above himself. As for Alois, perhaps, he put *everyone* above himself. It was as if he didn't consider himself important at all.

For the sake of others, he endured. For the sake of others, he sacrificed. That's why when he felt his selfish thoughts or feelings of dissatisfaction might burden others, he didn't voice them.

That was the impression she got.

“Mu,” Camilla bit her lip. Her hands balled into fists.

Then, she glared at Alois’ face, that hid his feelings like a mask.

“I see then!”

Alois looked bewildered by Camilla’s sudden shout. ‘What’s wrong?’, he wanted to say.

“That’s the end of my apologies. From now on, let’s talk about other things!”

Camilla said that with a strong voice as she clapped her hands together beside the confused Alois.

“Lord Alois, festivals are very fun.”

“O...kay...?”

“So, let’s make it a success! Lord Alois, I’ll have you enjoy it to the fullest!”

Alois blinked. He had no idea what Camilla was getting at all of a sudden.

“You’ll see after experiencing it just how fun it is, so you can do something for your own sake for once!”

Stepping in front of Alois, she pointed his finger at him. As she did, Alois stared at her, dumbfounded.

Camilla was a selfish person. Because she had been trying to use Alois for her own ends, she felt guilty now whenever they were close. Yet all she had to do was apologize for her wrongs and easily accept his goodwill as he forgave her. However, she could force goodwill onto him as well.

She was quick to anger. She was quick to fall into a slump. She did the same thing over and over without learning her lesson. Even if she gets into fights, finds herself pushed away and falls into depression, she couldn’t change so easily.

Camilla was selfish.

And so, she could tell Alois what she wished for.

“Camilla...”

Alois smiled like she had placed him in a tough spot. Camilla didn’t know the true intention of that smile, but to her, it was as if he were peering right into her.

But, for some reason, she couldn’t look away from it.

“You really are like the spring’s first ray of sunshine. The light of the sun that melts away the snow.”

“...Eh?”

As Alois spoke the type of words she never expected to hear from his mouth, Camilla looked bewildered.

“You’re bright and strong. To me, you are the sake I would do anything for.”

Camilla felt her throat clam up.

“Gugugu..” Camilla couldn’t face Alois as she stifled the sounds coming from her mouth. Inadvertently, she hurried ahead of him.

“Just where did you learn words like that?”

It was like a rehearsed pick-up line. Even though Klaus often said things like that, he usually said it like a joke, so it was unfair for Alois to say it with such a straight face.

“Did you hate it?”

As Camilla hurried ahead with her quick steps, Alois followed after her with his long strides.

Camilla stubbornly didn’t answer him as she glared straight ahead.

A scene was already unfolding at the florist.

“We’re here on Master Franz’s behalf! We’re warning you right now, don’t associate with any unsightly displays like festivals! You are only permitted to sell flowers if Lord Franz requests them!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! How do you expect me to run my business like that!?”

“You criminal! Did you not hear what I said, I’m here on Master Franz’s behalf!”

“I heard you! But Master Franz has never once visited here to buy flowers! Are you trying to destroy my livelihood!?”

“It only makes sense that it would be destroyed if you have no buyers. In the first place, soft and tepid things like flowers have no place in Blume!”

A group of men surrounded a woman who was the owner of the floristry, their voices so loud they could be heard from outside. None of them seemed to notice that Alois and Camilla had entered the shop either. They didn’t look back to see them, still just continuing their argument.

Putting the quarrel aside, the interior of the shop was surprisingly bland.

Was this due to the lack of flowers blooming during the winter? Accompanying the masses of empty flowerpots were a precious few plants that didn’t wither away over the winter months. Considering how empty the store seemed, it was a surprise that she was even in business during winter.

Even the men who were arguing with her now were clearly not there to buy flowers. They didn’t even seem to be from Blume at all, their formal clothes and the swords that hung from their waists made them look more like soldiers than anything. What’s more, Camilla recognized their leader’s heavy tone.

– They’re vigilantes.

It was not a self-governed group of young men who were native to Blume. They were a militia organized by Franz’s faction – the ones who abused Victor’s group and tried to humiliate Camilla in public. Camilla felt her brows furrow as she recalled that unpleasant memory.

And if she looked closely, she remembered their faces. Most of all, the man who stood front and centre as he harangued the shopkeeper was unforgettable. He was the very man who had directly insulted Camilla, after all.

“Stop that at once!”

As soon as she recognized that man, Camilla yelled out without caring about the consequences. “Who the hell!?” the men cried out as they turned around.

But when they saw Camilla, as well as Alois standing next to her, they frowned in confusion and surprise.

“L-Lord Alois!? W-what are you doing in such a place?”

It was the man who insulted Camilla before who seemed the most panicked now. Was it because he had come into conflict with Alois before? Maybe he was thinking that he was here to make sure there wouldn't ever be a second time?

"I came to purchase from the florist... However, if only Franz is permitted to buy flowers in Blume, then I suppose I am no exception either?"

Alois spoke with a calm and measured tone. Because he spoke so calmly, Camilla couldn't figure out whether he was being genuine or sarcastic.

"N-No, not at all, how could we ever stop you from purchasing what you like, Lord Alois..."

But, the man clearly took it as biting sarcasm. The bravado from mere minutes ago disappeared as he seemed to shrink before him. The other vigilantes looked confused by how cowed their leader suddenly seemed. Whatever anyone said, Alois was the lord of this land. His influence over the territory of Mohnton was absolute.

As the man backed away, he looked at his subordinates. Then, quickly raised his arm and motioned for them to leave as quickly as they could.

"You guys, get out of here now! Lord Alois, if you'll please excuse us..."

After bowing his head as low as he could, the man turned to escape the florist alongside his goons.

As he watched them leave, Alois calmly saw them off, before crossing his arms.

"Do those fellows have that little conviction?"

As Alois whispered that to himself, Camilla looked up at him.

– It looks like he's plotting something.

Even if he cared too much for others or was a bit of a 'good boy', Alois was still a lord, after all.

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Perhaps because they got rid of the vigilantes from her store, but it was quite easy to secure the cooperation of the florist after all that.

As for the florist herself, she said...

"Because there are flowers all over town, people don't think much of florists. But bouquets and wreaths can enhance the natural beauty of flowers that people pick... Or at least, that's what I think."

Back in the cellar where they always met, Camilla discussed the results of the past few days' work with the others. They had gone around town and spoken to the floristry shops, and almost all of them seemed to be in favour of the festival.

Part of the reason might have been the unwelcome attention they had been getting from Franz's faction. In their case, even if they went along with it and boycotted the festival, it wasn't as if they could get anything useful out of submitting to Franz. Whereas if they went along with Klaus' plans, it was another story.

On the other hand, the restaurants had proven to be troublesome. The only vice that was permitted in Mohnton was the consumption of luxurious meals. Even members of Franz's faction were important customers to them.

"About that, I talked to the old manhead chef. He said that if it's for Alois' sake, he'd cooperate."

But, it seemed like Klaus had plans to fix that problem. The job of speaking to Günter had been delegated entirely to Alois and Klaus. That was because Günter and Camilla still hadn't spoken since then.

Although Camilla did feel a touch of remorse, more than anything right now she was getting annoyed with Günter's endless sulking.

"Now we just need to get him to speak to the town's chefs. After all, the Brandt name still carries some weight, y'know? They're so connected in the culinary world it's actually a little scary."

Putting Camilla who fumed silently aside, Klaus kept talking.

It didn't seem like Günter's boast of being able to 'move a restaurant with his voice' was an empty boast. The Brandt family, once a noble house but now fallen from that position, had scattered throughout the land of Mohnton, many of them becoming renowned cooks.

Blume was no exception. If word spread about any of the restaurants employing 'one of those red-headed Brandt chefs', the reservations would be booked solid weeks in advance.

Even after the fall, the Brandt family still held influence... Or rather, it held a new kind of influence. Because they were always watched with suspicion by the remaining noble houses, they found life hard after the fall, so they had to support one another in order to survive. In particular, Günter, who was presently the 'head' of the family, had strong influence. Simply by having Günter in his employ, Alois enjoyed a good reputation with the restaurants and eateries in the territory.

"And, what about manpower?"

Klaus then turned to Victor. Since they were taking a break from practice, he had put his violin aside. As a participant in the debriefing, Victor flashed a thumbs up.

"It's going perfectly. I talked to the vigilantes... The *original* vigilantes, and they were happy to help out with the labouring. People have been fed up with Franz's men causing trouble lately, it seems... That said, I don't think we have enough security."

"It'll be fine. I've got some plans when it comes to security, so we should have enough people."

Saying that, Klaus nodded, evidently satisfied. After that, they talked about basic things such as where they were going to position the stalls and when they should start going up.

– Everything is working out.

They hadn't run into any major roadblocks and things were advancing smoothly. Despite his attitude, was this the result of Klaus' leadership? Even the current head of the household Rudolph, who seemed opposed to the idea at first, had somehow been coaxed into giving his tacit approval.

Most of the people in town were happy to cooperate with Klaus as well. Was that just a reflection of the town's nature? Or did they have some sort of expectations for Klaus, so much so they were willing to put their trust in him? They hadn't encountered any great resistance, even though what they were trying to bring to Blume was clearly taboo.

Perhaps, in their hearts, everyone was waiting for something like this. Being able to finally enjoy themselves out in the open without having to hide away in their homes or cellars.

Once tied down to tradition and history, it felt like Mohnton was changing.

There was only half a month until the seasons changed and spring began. They had originally come to Blume ostensibly to offer their New Year's greetings. After ringing in the new year, Alois and Camilla would be returning to the territory's capital.

The festival that would mark the end of their long visit would be incredibly fun.

Camilla believed in that.

81

Günter said that he would run a grilled meat stall during the festival.

Apparently, he chose that because the strong smell would supposedly hook in passers-by. The other proposed stalls would have things such as bread and roasted potatoes. There were also going to be stalls that were selling baked sweets and fruits

Camilla would have liked to have helped out with the cooking, but it didn't seem possible now. She didn't want to jeopardize everything by antagonizing Günter, who was working to bring around the restaurants to their cause by using the Brandt name.

That said, Camilla couldn't play an instrument and she wouldn't be much use when it came to manual labour either. Up until the day and even during the festival itself, Camilla felt like a bystander.

– I can't stand it.

After all, on the day itself, Klaus and Alois would be busy. Lately, the two of them were always talking to each other about something, and Camilla couldn't help but feel they were keeping their business from her. Those two must be overthinking everything again... That's what Camilla thought.

Putting aside those two busybodies, although it would be nice to walk around with Nicole, that felt like something she always did.

So, just what could she do?

– Perhaps I could make some garlands?

Perhaps because she had been so involved with getting the florists on board lately, that was the first thing that came to Camilla's mind. Making wreaths and garlands of flowers to give to all the festival-goers didn't seem like a bad idea at all. The work wouldn't be too taxing, it would make the festival all the prettier, and above all else...

– It's absolutely more fun to get involved, rather than just watching on!

Caught in the flow of the atmosphere, Camilla was looking forward to the New Year.

○

Despite winter not having come to a close, the first signs of spring were beginning to appear. As the snowfall gradually decreased, they met with the young vigilantes from the original group who had offered to help with the manual labour.

As the first buds began to appear on the snow covered trees dotting the footpaths, they began to gather wood with which to build the stands.

Despite being covered in snow, the first sprouts began to appear in the flower beds and potted plants around town.

The snow began to melt away.

When their breath didn't turn to steam and they could feel the warm rays of the sun as they stepped outside, the end of the festival preparations were in sight.

○

“Don't move. I still need to adjust it a little more.”

Mia's voice was serious as she pulled on the hem of Victor's clothes. As Mia once again wielded her needle, Victor tensed up.

What Victor was wearing was the band uniform that Mia had tailored. A white undershirt, with an eye catching jacket coloured a vivid shade of red. Its sleeves and collars were embroidered with threads of gold. The matching red trousers reached down to their knees. From the knees down were black boots with red laces.

“I guess fine feathers really can make fine birds.”

His friends poked fun at him as they joked with each other about their new clothes.

“Can't you just say that it suits me? Mia made it, after all.”

Victor said that like he was upset. Of course, he wasn't really angry. Even though they were making jokes at each others expense, the truth was that they truly thought the uniforms looked good.

“The day's almost here, huh?”

As Finne looked over herself wearing her red dress, she said that a little restlessly. Unlike the boys, the girls were wearing dresses of a matching colour. They were made to give them the freest movement they could. They weren't tight on the waist, whilst the sleeves covering both arms were loosely fitted.

“Will we be alright? I'm still a little nervous.”

“We'll be fine, we practiced so much, after all.”

Victor reassured the worried Finne, despite his face staying tense as Mia worked with her needle. But still, he looked around at his friends.

“More than that, what do you guys want to do next once this is all over? I want to try out some new sheet music.”

“Already thinking about that!?”

Mia yelled that at him as she tried to focus on her needlework. They hadn't even performed, yet it was as if he was already determined about what came next.

But still, Victor went on.

“I don’t want everything to be over after this. This time we were practicing for my wedding, but next time I’d like to do something different. I want to play a lot more. Don’t you guys think so too?”

Saying that, Victor looked at his friends one by one. Dieter, Otto, Finne and Verrat.

Everyone’s expressions were just as bright as their costumes.

– No, wait.

“Verrat? What’s wrong?”

There was one. Only Verrat looked down, squeezing the hem of her dress. When Victor called out to her in worry, she suddenly raised her head like he had startled her.

“T-That’s right? If there is... a next time...”

It was strange for her to speak so timidly, so Victor was a little concerned. But, before he could ask her anything further, her face changed back to her usually serious and impenetrable expression.

There were only a few more days until the festival and their public performance.

The doubts that Victor had quickly faded away as things got busier.

82

“Have you seen Lord Alois?”

No matter who Camilla asked, it didn't seem as if anyone could answer that question.

In Blume's main square, the festival preparations were keeping everyone busy that morning.

As Victor's group had their final practice on the stage they were going to perform on, they were having their last-minute debates about this note or another.

In a quieter corner of the square, a tent had been set up as both a changing and storage room. Inside, Mia was making some final adjustments to the band's costumes. Nicole was busy helping out, so she wasn't by Camilla's side.

Klaus was instructing the manpower in the square. With the stands needing erecting by midday, the young men were busy running to and fro carrying wood and other supplies.

Along the main boulevard, Günter was orchestrating the food stalls that were going up one after another.

Amongst all these busy people, she couldn't see sight nor sound of Alois.

Thinking that he was maybe busy organizing preparations somewhere, Camilla asked all sorts of people, but none of them had seen Alois. He had definitely been with them when they set out to begin the preparations for the festival that morning, but once things started to become busy it was like he had just melted away into the crowds.

– I thought it would have been nice to have him make some garlands with me.

Even after using a lot of them as decorations for the festival, there were still a large amount of flowers leftover from the deliveries the florists had made. She had found it boring making them alone in the tent, so she hoped that perhaps he could help her and set off to find him, but that wish had fallen flat.

– Just what is he doing, I wonder?

As Camilla worriedly thought about Alois' whereabouts, she dejectedly walked back to the tent. If he was only running an errand, he had been gone a long time, what's more, no one had seen him at all.

That being said, Alois wasn't exactly the kind of person who should be disappearing like this. If he was going somewhere he should, by all means, have told them, not to mention taking one or two people as escorts.

It was out of character for him to just slip away like this. Did he get into an accident? Or maybe he...

– Something feels wrong.

Should she ask Klaus to help search? No... Instead, should she take another look around the area? Perhaps he had been nearby this entire time and they just hadn't seen each other through pure bad luck? But...

Inside the tent, Mia and Nicole were working hard to iron out any wrinkles in the band's costumes.

Camilla's anxiety that caused her eyebrows to knit together in worry was drowned out by a sudden explosion that rang out from the direction of the main street.

○

As soon as she heard that booming sound, Camilla ran out of the tent in a hurry. Mia and Nicole too left the tent, utterly bewildered by the sudden noise.

The people who were working in the plaza had a similar reaction. Just as Camilla had jumped out of the tent, Victor and the others had put down their instruments and gotten off the stage to see what was going on at the same time. 'What's going on?' and 'What was that?', those sorts of voices began to buzz through the square.

Looking further, she could see that people were also looking shocked on the main street. Thankfully, it didn't seem as if there had been any injuries or damage to the stalls. But everyone who was milling around had a look of confusion on their faces, wondering just what on earth the source of that noise had been.

"H-Help! It's an emergency!"

Over the quietly confused throng of people, a single sharp scream sounded.

Camilla knew that voice, the one that echoed sharply through the crowd. As she heard it, Camilla was shocked when she saw that person rushing towards the square from the direction of the main street.

"Verrat!?"

Suddenly thinking about it, when she looked back at the band near the stage, Verrat definitely wasn't among them. Had she not noticed at all because she was so worried about Alois?

Just why had she alone left the square? It was an obvious question, but it was drowned out by Verrat's shout.

"There was an explosion in the back alley! Lots of materials got burned up and some people are hurt! Everyone, please, we have to help them!"

Just off the main street, there was an alleyway that led to a vacant lot. Because it was unused as well as being close to the main street, they had been using it in order to store all sorts of miscellaneous things needed for the festival that there wasn't room for in the tent, such as the wood for the stalls, various bolts of cloth and bundles of flowers and cooking supplies.

"We have to stop anyone else getting hurt! Quickly, we need to make sure everyone gets off the main street for now!"

Camilla didn't lose herself as she listened to Verrat's desperate plea. Being the first person to rush out of the square, she began to go as fast as she could down the main street.

Victor, Klaus and the others came right after her.

– I won't let you ruin this!

What was the cause of the explosion? Accident or incident, right now it didn't matter to Camilla.

– Because I am going to make this a success!

For Camilla's own sake... As well as Alois'.

Seized by that conviction, Camilla ran down the street.

○

Eventually, they arrived at the vacant lot along with half of the festival's manpower... To discover not much of anything.

Indeed, there had been an explosion. Some of the thinner boards of wood had been cracked in half. Some of the flowers and cooking equipment had been scattered around as well.

On the ground, at the centre of the apparent explosion, there was a smattering of blackened soil. After looking at the ground for a little while, Nicole told Camilla that it seemed similar to an accidental discharge of magical power.

"They might have had a manastone accident... But that can't be right. It's not something that can happen unless it was done intentionally."

"Intentionally?"

"Yes. The magic in manastones is much more stable than in people, but if its magic is poured into it from an outside source, it won't be able to maintain its shape... Umm... I don't know why someone would want to do it, but I suppose it would be possible for anyone to do."

Every human possessed at least a modicum of magical power. Even if some people had stronger or weaker magic than others, every person would be able to let it flow through them to some extent.

What's more, one's magic power could be compensated through the use of manastones. To transfer energy from a manastone, there was a push and pull factor, where energy is drawn from the manastone into a person's body. Anyone could cause an accidental explosion this way.

Of course, this was a horribly inefficient way to use manastones, which were an expensive resource. It was much easier to leave jobs requiring magic to people who naturally had large amounts of magical power, instead of using up valuable manastones at the risk of causing an accident.

Listening to Nicole's explanation, Camilla frowned. To put it simply... If this was a deliberate 'accidental discharge', then that means there was a culprit.

– Just who?

As Camilla was thinking, Klaus had already come to a conclusion. His eyes narrowed like he was about to laugh, but there wasn't a hint of a smile on his lips as he turned to the people gathered behind them.

“Where’s Verrat?”

Everyone looked startled by his sudden sharp words. But, as they looked around in a hurry, they couldn’t see Verrat at all.

“Oh, I see? So she was in charge of bringing us here, huh?”

Klaus frowned, glancing back at the blackened spot on the ground. Victor and the other’s felt their faces turn pale. Their faces filled with worry, they glanced back towards the main street.

– We have to go back.

Just as Camilla thought that, again there was another loud outburst of noise. This time, it was from the direction of the square... An outbreak of violent yells and screams.

Just as expected, a trap had been laid.

It was easy to assume there were one or two people who had betrayed them. Ever since the vigilante militia had foreseen their trip to the florist, he had made that prediction.

Judging from the timing of the information leak, it had to be one of the musicians or Mia. Even if it was someone out of the six, they were acting on someone else's behalf.

He still wasn't sure if they had been betrayed by multiple people or just one person alone. Or perhaps Franz's hands had already reached all of them?

He had enjoyed his time spent in that cellar, but he had never let his guard down. He hadn't feigned his interest in the young musicians' dreams or his admiration of their passion. But still, he always held onto his suspicions. Perhaps that was just the nature of one born to the House of Lörrich?

But whilst he had suspicions of the others, he trusted Alois and Camilla, as well as her maid Nicole.

That's why he always made absolutely sure that when he went out, one of those three would be by his side.

Klaus had been proceeding with caution for some time.

He made sure he was never completely alone. Avoiding taking on any work or responsibilities that would leave him isolated, he favoured going to places with as many people as possible. What's more, he never accepted any of his uncle's invitations. Even if he was directly invited to his study, he always found an excuse to decline.

He'd had conversations with Franz. However, he had flat out rejected the offer to 'talk alone', always bringing a guard or two with him.

Eventually, he knew that his uncle would grow impatient by how stubbornly he was defending himself. But, there was no way they could have let the festival go off without a hitch. It was being held in the name of 'Celebrating Klaus' appointment as the successor', after all. Their pride and honour wouldn't allow Klaus to make such a conclusive statement in so public a manner.

The reason why Klaus had proposed a festival in the first place was that he knew that something 'bright' and 'fun' would more easily provoke his uncle's short temper.

He had to have hated it. It must have been like an itch constantly crawling under his skin. He must want to dispose of Klaus who was so stubbornly opposing him as quickly as possible.

Eventually, he would have reached the limits of his patience.

That time seemed to have come.

The sounds that resounded from the plaza were angry yells alongside the sounds of things toppling over and crashing to the ground. Victor and the other young vigilantes rushed back out of the alleyway in a panic.

Klaus also turned to follow them back to the square. Being one of the first ones to enter the alleyway, it made sense he was one of the last to leave. Camilla must have been the same.

“Klaus!”

When Camilla saw Klaus behind her, she called out to him in sheer worry.

“Do you know where Lord Alois is!? I haven’t caught sight of him this whole time! He wasn’t with this group either, perhaps, do you think he got caught up in the...!?”

Camilla’s complexion turned pale as her words trailed off. The thought that Alois might have come to harm left her speechless.

Thinking back, he had seen Camilla looking all over the square for Alois earlier. It wasn’t as if they were always together with one another. What’s more, they had different jobs to do today. It should have been fine if they were apart for a while... But, he didn’t expect to see that look on Camilla’s face.

“Camilla, that guy is-”

Despite his jealousy towards Alois for being so fortunate to have Camilla worry about him, he felt a sense of guilt as he heard Camilla’s words as well, so he turned around to say something to her.

As he turned, he wasn’t particularly looking at anything. His eyes simply wandered.

But, the words Klaus wanted to say stuck in his throat. He took a deep breath and then sighed, pretending as if he hadn’t noticed it.

“Camilla.”

Klaus didn’t look at Camilla as he spoke. His gaze was fixed behind her, in the shadows of the vacant lot.

“You should go ahead.”

“What...?”

“There’s something else I want to look into here.”

He tried to hide it, but Camilla noticed just how serious Klaus’ tone was. She didn’t go back down the alleyway, instead, she eyed Klaus dubiously.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing. You should just go ahead and see what’s happening in the square. It sounds like something troublesome is going on there.”

This time, Klaus’ serious gaze centred back on Camilla as he asked her.

“Settle the problem in the square, Camilla. You’re the only one I can rely on.”

Klaus knew that putting it that way was unfair. If he said it like that, it was as if he was forcing Camilla to assume responsibility for whatever happened.

But despite how thunderous her face looked, Camilla bit her lip and nodded.

“I do not know what you’re thinking, but... I understand.”

“Thanks.”

As Klaus thanked her so sincerely yet so hastily, Camilla frowned. But, deciding not to press him on it further, she ran past him back towards the square, not once turning back around.

Klaus did his best to suppress a smirk as she rushed past him. As she proudly held the ends of her skirt to move as fast as she could, her running form was quite funny looking.

Klaus breathed out as he smiled softly to himself.

Then, he took a deep breath.

“Hey, Franz, this plan of yours wasn’t half bad.”

Klaus shrugged as his voice changed back to his usual frivolous tone. One by one, Franz’s vigilante militiamen stepped out of the shadows of that cluttered lot.

Simply put, Klaus was the one they had wanted to lure here. They needed to pull Klaus away from the very public square to somewhere with far fewer eyes. They wanted him all alone in this deserted place. So, in order to do that, they had to make two distractions.

Of course, there was another reason for the ruckus going on in the square. By no means could Franz allow the festival to go on.

But, ending this festival wasn’t the only aim. With sufficient uproar and a show of force, it would be possible to instill a sense of fear into the townspeople. It would be a bitter pill to swallow for everyone who participated, to see all that preparation come to naught. After this, no one would try to organize another festival.

He was angry. But, the situation being as it was, there wasn’t much he could do about it. Or maybe he was simply satisfied with ensuring Camilla escaped?

“Usually you’re honest to a fault. I can’t say I hate the idea of you scheming outside the box a bit.”

For now, he would put up a front.

With a malicious grin on his face, Klaus looked around at the people who were slowly surrounding him.

There were only five men who surrounded Klaus.

Was it because most of their manpower was being used to break up the festival? Or, were there still more of them hiding somewhere? It was hard to say which it was.

But it was all the same to Klaus. He was no warrior, so fighting against five people was utterly hopeless. It was impossible for him to win in any honest tussle and being confronted like this, it would

prove incredibly difficult to pull off any clever trick. It didn't take long for his only exit from the lot to be cut off behind him. It didn't seem like even fleeing would be possible now.

Klaus looked around at the faces of the five men around him. One of them who caught his eye was a man he had known for many years.

A man with curly light brown hair, similar to Klaus'. But, he was taller than Klaus with broader shoulders. That expression of nervousness that he stubbornly tried to hide with a frown perhaps revealed his contrary nature.

"Brother, that mouth of yours never changes, does it?"

Franz said that as a grin came to his face. Then, he slowly walked towards Klaus.

"That mouth..."

Klaus stood on the spot. Was it because of his faith in their blood relationship that he believed he wasn't going to be immediately murdered? Klaus didn't shrink back at all even as Franz came eyeball to eyeball with him, though he wondered just what he was going to do.

It wasn't anything good.

"I've wanted to shut it closed for the longest time."

After letting out the breath he had been holding, Franz slammed a fist into Klaus' cheek.

Klaus couldn't stay upright due to the force of the sudden sucker punch. As he fell down, Franz followed and straddled on top of him, grasping the nape of his neck.

Then, turning him over, he forced him to look up at him, into those eyes that were filled with hatred.

"Why couldn't you have just died back then?"

"Who else would harass you if I was gone?"

As Franz spoke those cold words to him, Klaus laughed mockingly in his face.

It had been nineteen years since Franz was born and it had been a decade since Klaus had failed to die.

The first time these two brothers had openly come to blows was a truly terrible sight to behold.

The main boulevard was already in a terrible state.

“Stop messing around!? What the hell kind of vigilantes are you!? Take off your damned masks!!”

“We are acting under the authority of the Lörriich family! Take you and your children and go home!”

“Shaddup! You guys are destroying this town!”

“We won’t rest until we have rounded up all those who have given themselves over to vice! We are this town’s true protectors!”

The youths who had been helping with the manual labour and the youths who were quick to resort to violence. When these two opposing vigilante groups faced each other, it might have been inevitable this would happen.

When Camilla rushed back out onto the main street, the chaos was already so rampant that she couldn’t tell the groups apart anymore. The vigilantes swarmed and mingled with one another, shouting insults and throwing punches. The nearby stalls were caught up in the fighting, with their supports being kicked out or people being shoved into them, causing them to collapse. A lot of the cooks from the restaurants had already fled, but the more hotheaded ones had already jumped into the fray to protect their work.

“S-Stop this! Stop this at once!!”

But even though Camilla raised her voice, no one on the street paid any notice. In the first place, could they even hear her voice over all this chaos? No one even looked Camilla’s way.

Looking at the surroundings as she desperately shouted, she saw the stalls that seemed to have been smashed up on purpose. Perhaps, at the beginning of the fracas, Franz’s vigilantes had attacked the stalls and the younger vigilantes who had been helping them must have tried to stop them.

But, now both groups were blindly fighting, with the stalls falling around them as a result. The signs that were going to be put above them had been smashed, the cookware bent and the dishes shattered. When she saw that even the flowers had been trampled under their feet, the heat rose to Camilla’s head.

– He calls this ‘taking care of security’!?

She swore to never trust Klaus again after this.

As that grudge against Klaus fermented in her head, Camilla breathed out angrily. Then, she shut her eyes and shook her head.

Trying to shout over this riot would be fruitless. And there wasn’t anything that she could do just by herself. If she tried to enter the fray to try and intervene personally, Camilla would only get needlessly hurt.

– Even though he said that he would entrust it to me. Even though he asked me to settle it...

There didn't seem to be anything Camilla could do here. Camilla, all alone and without anyone by her side, felt more powerless than ever before.

– Lord Alois...

Even though she had told him that she would make it work. Even though she told him that she would make it fun.

Everything had already become a complete mess. Regret washed over her as she looked down. Biting her lip and balling her hands into fists, Camilla glared at her feet.

“Gu...”

From the back of her mouth, a voice leaked out. A voice that was as if she was trying to suppress tears.

“Guuu...”

She put more power into her feet. If she didn't do that, she felt like she might sink to her knees.

She had looked forward to it. She had wanted to make it fun. She had spent so long preparing... But even if the preparations were fun themselves, the climax was just too disappointing.

Her heart felt broken.

Gazing at the ground, she sighed angrily, then took a deep breath.

Then, instead of tears, instead she spat that breath back out with all her might.

“Guu... I... I... I hate thiiiis!”

No one heard Camilla's forceful yell. That was fine. Camilla didn't yell it for anyone else to hear.

“I will not give up! Are there any men spare!? Lord Alois!? Where are Victor and the rest!?”

They weren't there. No matter where she looked, there weren't sight nor sound of them.

If Alois or Victor were near, they would've heard Camilla's words. Right now, she needed to gather whoever she could to help her throw water over the spreading fire that was the fighting in the street. Alois and the others might even have gotten caught up in the uproar and might need help straight away.

She was worried about Klaus as well, who was all alone in that vacant lot, but right now she had to focus on the problems in front of her.

Giving her cheeks a slap, Camilla ran up the main boulevard, searching for the faces she knew.

○

She loved Victor.

She only wished for Victor's happiness. That wasn't a lie.

Even if Victor didn't choose her, she would be fine so long as he was happy. And when the day came for her to say 'congratulations' with that cool face, she would be proud of just how good she looked when she did it.

But, if Mia was his partner, then Victor might not find the happiness she wished for him.

Mia was the daughter of a poor tailor. She wasn't well-educated, had a rough upbringing and even her way of talking was brusque and mannish. Just like their reputation stated, craftsmen were base and coarse.

For someone from an affluent family like Victor, a girl from a richer house would be more suitable. That way, both their families could be happy as well. If both of the families were wealthy, then it would be easy to cultivate a business relationship as well. Especially since Victor's family were merchants. A relationship with any other affluent family would only bring value.

She only wished for Victor's happiness.

Therefore, this was all for Victor's sake.

She hadn't done anything wrong.

All the people leading the vigilantes had told Verrat that.

○

There was a small stage that had been set up for the band in the plaza.

The torn red dress that was draped across its front was a more vivid decoration than any wreath of flowers.

The skin of the drum had been pierced, a broken stick shoved through it. The flute and the oboe were harder to break. After smashing them on the steps, she couldn't break them, but at least they were bent somewhat. But, since some of the keys had flown off, they wouldn't make such a decent sound anymore.

All that was left was the violin.

It wasn't hard to break a wooden violin. Even if it was a young woman who was smashing it into the ground, it would easily shatter.

She raised it high, high in the air... But as she held it there, shaking in her hand, Victor and the others arrived.

"Verrat! Stop it!"

When she heard Victor's shout, her hand stopped shaking. But, then she saw Mia standing next to him.

"Why did you do something like this!?"

When she heard her agonized scream, Verrat's face twisted into a grimace. Why? That was an easy question. It was all for Victor's sake.

When she sighed with a smile, she finally found her determination again. But just as Verrat was about to calmly swing down and dash that violin against the ground...

"STOP THAT AT ONCE!"

Before she could bring it down, she heard a shrill and angry voice of a woman, much closer than Victor and the others.

Just as she did, she suddenly felt something smack into her body.

When that woman smashed against her body and rolled with her on the ground, she didn't realize who it was. It was only after that woman sat on top of her did Verrat remember.

When she saw that fierce look in her eyes. As Verrat stared at her angry glare, she realized that the person who tackled her was the infamous villainess that everyone knew... Camilla.

85

She had run into the plaza as she searched for Victor and the others. The first thing that Camilla noticed was Verrat raising that violin high above her head.

As she saw the desecrated stage and the shock on Victor and his friend's faces, she instinctively knew what she was about to do.

So, she dived in, not really thinking about what would happen next.

"Just what are you doing, you!?"

Camilla shouted as she sat on top of Verrat, grabbing her collar.

There wasn't even a shadow of her usual cool face. The expression with which she looked up at Camilla with was unstable and trembling.

When Camilla tackled her, it seemed like Verrat had dropped Victor's violin. It had fallen a little ways away, but no one had picked it up. Victor, Mia and their friends were just looking at Camilla and Verrat in stunned silence.

"...Let go of me."

Despite that expression of hers, Verrat's voice was calm. With a tone that sounded as if she had lost all of her emotion, she grabbed Camilla's arm that held her down.

"This is for Victor's sake."

"Just what are you saying?"

As Camilla glared at her, Verrat paid her a quick glance. Then, she looked away again, her eyes drifting to Victor's violin.

"Mia isn't worthy of being with Victor. So, Mia is bad. Mia was the reason Victor learned to play music as well."

Verrat spoke plainly. It wasn't a loud voice, and the violent ruckus playing out in the main street could still be heard, but somehow what she was saying cut through all of that.

Listening to her words and the way she said them, Camilla felt something was truly off.

"...Didn't you say that you wanted to learn how to sing, so that you could celebrate their marriage?"

"That's right. But, Mia is bad. So, I'm going to end it like this."

Verrat let out a small, derisive laugh.

When she saw that crooked smile of hers, Camilla finally realized it.

Earlier, when Victor and the others were caught by the vigilantes, Camilla had her suspicions that someone must have sold them out. But when Camilla realized that Alois was the most likely suspect, she ruled out the possibility of a traitor.

But, Camilla's suspicions were almost correct.

"You were the one who told the vigilante militia. You told them about the cellar."

Verrat didn't answer her. But, that told her all she needed to know.

After Victor was freed from the vigilantes, she had heard that his engagement to Mia might be in jeopardy. Since it was a disgrace for a wealthy merchant's son to be caught up in something like that, someone would have to take responsibility. Since Mia was the daughter of a poor tailor, Verrat figured that she might have been made an easy scapegoat.

The reaction of Victor's family must not have factored into Verrat's plan at all. Instead of cancelling his engagement to Mia, it was as if they encouraged him to have another go at music.

"For the sake of Victor's happiness, Mia isn't suitable. Everyone said that it would be for the best if the two of you separated."

"...Who are 'they'?"

Verrat smiled contemptuously. It had an unsettling quality to it.

"Is this seriously what you think?"

Camilla hated looking at that distorted face. It was unbearably irritating. The words coming from Verrat's mouth were equally uncomfortable to hear.

"Something like that is..."

As she said that, Camilla looked around.

Around that stage, which they had talked about like it was a dream. The costumes that had been tailored to fit them all perfectly. The instruments that had finally felt natural in their hands. She remembered them practising constantly, all looking forward to this day.

Everything had been ruined, the stage they had dreamt about was gone. Verrat's friends looked down bitterly, without raising their voices. They were sad, but they were also hurt.

Verrat, who they had met with, practised with and laughed with, she had ruined everything with her own hands.

"And you're saying, this is all for Victor's sake...!? Surely you must know just how much pain you're putting him through by doing this!?"

She inadvertently poured power into those hands that gripped at Verrat. Even Verrat seemed startled by the sudden force. Something human showed itself in that distorted expression.

"How can you say that this is for anyone!? If you're seriously saying that, then you are the lowest of the low!"

"...I didn't..."

In response to Camilla's scream, Verrat muttered.

“I didn’t want to see Victor get hurt either. But, it wasn’t just me, everyone said that this was the right thing to do...”

“That’s what I said, who is this ‘everyone’!?”

“The people from the vigilantes said that this was for Victor’s sake! I didn’t want to do this either! But, I had to, for Victor!”

Verrat grabbed Camilla’s dress and pulled her close. As she yanked her forward, the two of them were face to face.

“I want Victor to be happy! So even if I didn’t want to do it, I had to!! I didn’t have a choice!”

As dishevelled hair flowed over her shoulders, Verrat yelled out with a desperate expression.

She didn’t look anything like the cool and dignified Verrat from before, instead, she was awfully... unsightly.

“This isn’t what I wanted to happen! But, I had to do it for the person I love! You of all people understand, don’t you!?”

“I do not understand at all!”

As Verrat pulled her close, Camilla didn’t avert her eyes.

“Everything I did was of my own will and for my own sake. Something like ‘I had no choice’ never crossed my mind!”

As a result of that, she had been exiled from the capital and became known as an infamous villianess. Of course, she wasn’t happy about that. She often fumed about just how things went. She had regrets, grudges and simmering anger, but she never once used other people as an excuse. Her actions were never the result of being coerced or coaxed into something, they were ultimately Camilla’s own choice.

She had wished for Prince Julian’s happiness. But, Camilla never acted on anyone else’s behalf.

“Because someone told you to? Because you were doing it on someone else’s behalf? Unless you were being threatened, that’s not an excuse. You really intend to do all of this and then claim that you’re not the one in the wrong!?”

“But, everyone...!”

“Everyone is not you! Act for yourself!”

Camilla grabbed Verrat’s wrists that clung to her dress and pushed them back. Even she was surprised by how much force she could put into her arms. Even though Verrat had the momentum, Camilla still overpowered her.

“Do you even understand what you’re doing right now!? Making excuses and pushing the blame onto others... Didn’t you say that you didn’t want to be an unsightly woman!?”

I never want to become an unsightly girl. I don’t want to expose a disgusting side of myself. I want to stay beautiful.

It was Verrat herself who had said those words that caused Camilla to boil over all that time ago.

But, the once ever cool and dignified Verrat now mirrored exactly the words she spoke. A love that Camilla could never emulate, one that graciously accepted its end. When she thought about what she said back then, Camilla only got angrier now.

“Nobody forced you to do what you did here! Take responsibility for your own actions!”

If one could realize their own faults, they could atone for them. And if one wouldn't accept that, then so be it. Even if the world scorned you, you should stick out your chest with pride anyways.

But, right now, Verrat couldn't do either. The hands that Camilla had pulled off her didn't have any power in them, as she sobbed softly.

“But... But, I wasn't the only one. Everyone said that this was for the best... That's what they told me... If no one said that, I wouldn't have ever...”

“That's enough.”

Camilla said that curtly as she looked down at Verrat, who kept making excuses as she softly sobbed.

“Right now, you're truly unsightly. Look around you. Look at the faces of your friends.”

As Camilla sighed brusquely, she looked around. As if following her line of sight, Verrat looked as well.

On that broken stage. Watching Camilla and Verrat from a distance were her friends.

Victor, Otto, Finne and Dieter. They didn't lash out at Verrat, nor did they try to stop Camilla, they just looked on darkly.

In the hearts of those young musicians who were looking forward to today more than anything else, the overwhelming emotion was disappointment. And it was Verrat who had trampled on those hearts.

Verrat groaned as she lay under Camilla.

As tears welled up in her eyes, she blinked, looking at every person in turn. To Verrat, they were friends she had known longer than any other. All the time that they had spent laughing together, the fun they had together, all the encouragement and praise they had given to each other, Verrat alone had ruined it.

Verrat knew that this was what would happen. She had imagined the kinds of faces that her friends would make when they found out.

But, it was for Victor's sake. Everyone said that this was for the best.

So, it wasn't her fault... But, she couldn't take pride in it.

Because the disappointment in their faces were like daggers in her heart.

The blows that rained down on him were almost naïve in their monotony.

It was as if every punch was thrown with the weight of a different grievance filled memory behind them. But even if every hit was considered like that, considering the weight difference between them, they still hurt.

“You’re...!”

As Klaus raised his arms to protect his face, Franz pummeled them. As the blows thudded against them, Klaus thought that his arms might break under his younger brother’s power.

“You’re always taking away the things I want!”

The love he should have received as a child. The expectations of his parents. The trust of the people. He had even snatched away his first love.

He had a handsome face, he was cultured and he was clever. Just what lay behind the eyes of the younger brother who envied his talented elder? Klaus knew.

“Just what more do you want!? How much more do you have to take from me before you’re satisfied!?”

Franz was by no means a useless person. He had a strong body and studied diligently. He was an ordinary man who made up for his shortcomings by working hard. His character may be slightly skewed, but it was never warped to a serious degree. He always tried to think logically and seemed like the picture of excellence, never letting any of his weaknesses show.

“Argh, isn’t it enough already!? You have everything you want, don’t you!? This is the *only* thing I have!”

The only thing that Franz had over Klaus was that healthy body. People often whispered about them at an early age ‘if only it had been the other way around’. If only Franz instead had the weakness that was supposed to have taken Klaus’ life before he was ten. The number of people who thought that wasn’t small.

Yet, the reason Franz didn’t hate his older brother and could endure all those cold glares was because he thought that Klaus would die young. Eventually, all those eyes that showered Klaus with affection would have had to turn to him one day.

And yet...

“Why are you alive!? Why did you come back!? Why!?”

As he voiced out his remorse, Franz kept hitting Klaus. As he let his emotions take over, his voice turned into a scream.

“How much do you think I’ve worked for this!? How desperately long it took!? And you’re just going to take it all away again... Brotheeeeeeeeeeeeeer!!”

Franz had always worked desperately to not seem like the inferior substitute to Klaus as an inheritor. But, no matter how hard he tried, Franz could never catch up to Klaus. His parents, his relatives, even the servants, all of them only looked Klaus' way. They didn't even notice how hard Franz worked. He was only ever just Klaus' substitute.

But, Franz couldn't give up on the succession. Because as a child, it was for that reason alone his parents ever looked his way, his one source of pride.

Franz held a deep insecurity when it came to Klaus. He envied what Klaus had, was jealous of his talents, admired what he was and also hated him for it.

Klaus knew just what went through the mind of his poor younger brother.

Because, in a way, Klaus was the same.

"I never wanted to be a genius, either."

Klaus spat that out, along with some blood. Through the gaps in his arm, he could see Franz's panting face. Klaus didn't know how many times that Franz, who was riding on top of him after he fell on his back, had punched at him anymore.

Franz's arms were sinewy with muscle. They were well toned and had a healthy complexion. The other hand that grasped at Klaus' neck had a huge amount of youthful strength.

Klaus grabbed the arm that held his neck. Klaus' arms were thin, and whilst some might call them charmingly feminine, right now he could only see them as useless and dainty. His skin was pale. Their brawn or arm strength was negligible.

"I didn't want to be born 'talented'. If I could, I would hand it all over to you...!"

He could feel more blood welling up in his mouth. This was the first time Klaus had been caught up in a fight or beaten like this. After all, he had spent half of his life secluded away in one of the mansion's rooms.

"Do you think you were the only one who was envious...!? How did you think I felt every time I saw you!?"

A body that couldn't walk for the longest time. A pitiful life that wasn't supposed to have seen out its tenth year. Even though Franz was younger, he soon towered over him in height in no time. Even after overcoming that foretold death, Klaus' body had always remained weak, even now. No matter how much he ate, he couldn't put on weight nor muscle, and he got sick easily.

"You could run around outside! You didn't have to spend every day wondering if it was your last! You never had to wonder 'will I even wake up tomorrow?!' You had no idea how much I envied you!!"

"So you knew!?"

Franz raised his fist. It was easy to predict just where it would fall, because even if they were heavy they were also monotonous. Especially considering how many punches he'd received already.

“Even if I had to throw away my ‘talent’, I wanted a healthy body! I wanted to walk around outside. I wanted to see the flowers bloom for real. I wanted to walk through the towns streets on my own two feet, not just see them from a window!”

Franz’s fist sailed down towards him. Taking advantage of the chance as Franz’s punch only swung through empty air as he dodged, Klaus shifted to push Franz off of him. Franz, who had been astride Klaus, fell backwards, and their situation was reversed. As the back of Franz’s head struck the ground, he was dazed for a moment as he looked up, dumbfounded.

“I was always watching you run around outside from my window.”

Even though they were brothers... Just why were they so different? He resented him. He envied him. As Franz was jealous of Klaus, Klaus hated Franz. Although he fortunately survived, over the course of that decade, Klaus and Franz’s relationship had become warped.

“I was jealous, and I couldn’t help feeling that way. I envied you, especially because you didn’t even notice how lucky you were. I longed for what you had, as I watched from the window.”

From the window. As the sun shone through its opening. He couldn’t even feel the breeze from outside as he lay in his bed. Time and time again, from that window, he watched as his mother and father had taken Klaus out to visit Blume.

Often times, the town had been blooming full of spring’s finest flowers. Awash with those beautiful white petals. The white flower that symbolized Klaus’ desire.

“For me, the one that symbolized what I desired, my Sehnsucht, that was always you...!”



俺なら
俺は、駒じゃなくて、
お前がいいんだ、
フランツ

フランツ
クラウドの弟

“...Then, why?”

Underneath Klaus, Franz said those words as if all the wind had been knocked out of his sails. Did he hit his head too hard? Or was having the tables turned on him that much of a shock? It seemed like he had calmed down a little bit, but he still didn't return Klaus' gaze.

“You wanted to be praised by our parents, didn't you? To be acknowledged for what you've done, right?”

“Then, why!?”

“I'll acknowledge you.”

Not intimidated by Franz's angry yell, Klaus said that.

“I envied you and watched you all the time. I know just how hard you worked. I know your strengths and your weaknesses. I'll give you a place where you can truly show your value.”

Franz looked up at Klaus, opening his mouth. But, he closed it again, without saying a word. He couldn't put his feelings into words, as he kept breathing raggedly.

"Leave uncle behind and come work under me. You're too good to be working under him, anyways. That guy only sees you as a pawn."

Their uncle was recklessly ambitious. There was no doubt he'd work to make Franz his puppet. If Franz couldn't become the successor, he'd toss him aside.

But still, he was the one who had given Franz purpose and drive. That's why he had worked to his uncle's designs. Even if at times the methods made him balk.

"You like this town as it is too, right? If our uncle takes over, he would just make it into his tool. Even you can't overlook that, can you?"

"Brother..."

"Be my right arm, Franz. I need you to do the things that I can't."

Taking a deep breath, Klaus said that as he looked at Franz.

Franz bit his lip as he looked back at Klaus, trying to figure out if he truly meant what he said... But, that's when it happened.

Franz opened his eyes wide in surprise. At the same time, Klaus felt something cold pressed up confidently against his neck.

"That's far enough, Klaus."

A bitter and aged voice echoed in that empty lot.

"You always have been the obstructive sort, haven't you?"

That huge man whose roughness didn't seem to fit the Lörlich house at all stepped into the vacant lot.

But, Klaus couldn't see the figure of that hateful uncle Lucas of his, whose face was twisted with unbridled ambition. In fact, it was difficult for Klaus to even turn around right now, as he sat atop Franz.

The reason for that was easy.

One of the vigilante militiamen was holding a sword against the side of Klaus' neck.

The blade's edge touched Klaus' defenceless neck.

If its wielder wanted it to, it could take Klaus' head in an instant.

The vigilante holding his blade against Klaus' neck wasn't alone. In addition to those who were already there in the first place, Lucas had brought in several more men.

Unlike Franz, it didn't seem as if Lucas had any interest in dealing with Klaus personally. He flanked himself with vigilante men and kept a distance from Klaus that he couldn't hope to bridge before being cut down.

No, in fact it wouldn't do to use the word 'vigilante' anymore, these were Lucas' private soldiers. The men who didn't seem to fit at all into this town of secret mirth were not originally from Blume, but were in Lucas' personal employ.

"...You finally showed yourself, uncle. I was wondering if you were just going to cower in your room until the show was over."

"If I didn't intervene, you might have pulled the wool over Franz's eyes. That boy is honest, so he might fall for your swindles. You're just like Gerda, in a way."

"I'd rather you put it down to my natural charm."

Klaus smiled as he let his mouth run. That being said, it seemed as if Lucas had been waiting in the wings, just in case Franz failed. If Franz has killed Klaus without any complications, then Lucas wouldn't have shown himself at all.

Lucas' prudence was one of his few good points. The control of the vigilante militia and Klaus' demise, he had intended for all of it to reflect on Franz, not himself. Even if it was an open secret that he was pulling the strings, he didn't leave any trace of evidence to that fact.

But, since he seemed to be enjoying such an overwhelming advantage now, he looked to be enjoying himself a little bit. Klaus' life was entirely in Lucas' hands. With one command, he could bring everything to an end.

"Did you manage to coax Duke Montchat with that silver tongue of yours? Gracious, you pretend to be so unselfish, but you really are a glutton aren't you? Did you want to become the successor so badly?"

"Aren't you talking about yourself, uncle? You want control of the House of Lörrieh so badly that you're going to murder me for it?"

Although the Lörrieh family were proud and held great influence over Blume, they were still subservient to the Montchat dukes. In effect, they were nothing more than low ranking nobility in a remote region, without any real territorial claims of their own.

Although Franz's desire didn't extend beyond becoming the successor to the Lörrieh family, for the ambitious Lucas, that was far from enough to satisfy him.

“Besides, you know that I have Alois in the palm of my hand, don’t you? If you kill me, you’ll basically be declaring open rebellion against the House of Montchat.

When Klaus said that, Lucas merely scoffed. Klaus couldn’t see the expression on Lucas’ face with his back turned, but it wasn’t difficult to imagine. Surely, he was sneering down haughtily at Klaus, something he had been wanting to do for quite some time.

“The House of Montchat is nothing to me.”

“...Even though your opponent would be a Duke?”

“And, so what? Duke or no, I’ll swallow him whole. That dullard they call the ‘Toad of the Swamp’, he would be easy to control. If even Gerda can do it, then why can’t I?”

The sword touching Klaus’ neck twitched. Was it because Klaus moved slightly, or the sword’s owner? In order to see Lucas, Klaus twisted his neck ever so slightly.

“You sure are talkative today, aren’t you uncle? Do you even realize just what nonsense you’re spouting?”

Lucas glared as Klaus looked at him angrily. But, soon a bold grin crept back to his face. There was no way he could do anything about the situation he found himself in, after all. Klaus’ head could be cut clean off whenever Lucas pleased.

There was still a lot of noise coming from the main street. In the first place, the ruckus out on the boulevard was intended to keep anyone from checking back here. There was no one who would come to save Klaus and there were men outside with strict orders to stop anyone foolish enough to try.

“Why shouldn’t I be talkative? Today is a memorable day, after all. My poor nephew Klaus died in a tragic accident and Franz was confirmed as the next head of the House of Lörrich.”

“So, what do you intend to do about the Duke that’s still in town? It’s not going to go as easily as you think. Alois isn’t stupid enough to fall for that.”

“To get what you want, you have to have the power to seize it. That’s why I gathered these soldiers. And if I need to have them kill a frog... I don’t think there’ll be a problem.”

Lucas laughed again at Klaus’ words.

“The Montchat family is merely a stepping stone to me, anyways. I won’t be confined to a dreary duchy such as this. Eventually, I’ll even own the royal palace itself.”

“...Well, I suppose it’s admirable to have big dreams.”

Klaus frowned at his uncle’s arrogance.

Then, just like his uncle before him... That frown turned into a grin.

“But, dreams are just that, right? Dreams. Besides, going by that, uncle... You’re a traitor.”

Lucas crossed his arms, looking at the smiling Klaus. The eyes that looked at Klaus almost looked as if they had a shred of pity in them,

“So, do you have anything else left to say? Do you really think that you’re going to survive this? Well, because of certain soft reputations, I guess why you might think that. The people in this town really are adverse to even cutting someone, much less killing them.”

As he said that, Lucas raised a hand. The soldiers watched his movement. It was like a conductor raising his baton. As soon as that hand fell, the soldiers would move.

“But, I’m not so sweet. I can’t have anyone revealing my secrets, so I’ll have you die here, Klaus.”

Every movement. Lucas stared hard at Klaus, making sure he didn’t move suspiciously.

Making sure he definitely wasn’t hiding anything. That he had no way of fighting back. That there was nothing stopping him from having Klaus’ slender neck cleaved through.

“Do not bother begging for your life. I did you the kindness of letting you have a final exchange with your family before your death, but this is the end.”

And with those merciless words, Lucas lowered his hand.

“Kill him.”

Lucas pointed at Klaus.

In response to that, the sword held against Klaus’ neck moved. The soldier laid a second hand on that blade.

He had expected that this festival would settle everything.

The traitor acted according to expectations. All that remained was to remove the biggest obstacle to Lucas’ ambition. He would absolutely kill Klaus.

He couldn’t give him even the slightest chance to escape. Klaus had a glib tongue. If Lucas completely entrusted this task to an incompetent, there was every chance they could be coaxed into his palm.

In order not to let that happen, Lucas made sure to oversee this personally.

So, Lucas had to be there. If only to make certain of Klaus’ death.

After Klaus had been killed, then the rest would all fall into place.

The setting for this ending had been of Klaus’ own design.

After letting him take the first move, he had made every move since to bring it to this end.

Everything had gone according to plan.

Then, suddenly, the soldier sheathed his blade as if it were only the most natural thing in the world.

In response, Klaus finally stood up, looking at Lucas who blinked in surprise.

“...What is the meaning of this?”

Lucas muttered, barely believing the situation in front of his eyes. Klaus shrugged with a snide grin, as he smacked the shoulder of the soldier who had been holding a sword to his neck only a minute ago.

“It’s something like this.”

The soldier breathed out, as if at Klaus’ signal. At the same time, a huge amount of magical energy flowed through the lot. Even Lucas, who didn’t have particularly strong magic, could feel the energy intensely on his skin. He only knew one person who had this kind of power.

“...As expected, it took quite a lot to endure changing my face for half a day.”

“No no, that’s only to be expected *of you*. You managed to look perfect and didn’t even let any mana leak out, you’re really a monster when it comes to magic, aren’t ya?”

“Thanks to that, I barely have any magical power left. It would’ve been dangerous if that went on any longer, Klaus.”

The man who stood there with an exhausted looking face wasn’t one of Lucas’ soldiers. But, it was definitely a man Lucas knew.

Silver hair. Red eyes. Lucas was stunned by the sudden presence of a man with such royal features.

“Lord... Alois...”

“Lucas, I am sorry, but I cannot ignore what I just heard.”

As he looked at Lucas, Alois exhaled deeply. Alois was a forgiving sort of lord, but not even he was forgiving enough to let someone who sought to bring harm to Mohnton off so easily.

“Why... No, I... No... Noo...”

Lucas seemed lost for words. Every time he tried to come up with an excuse, it wouldn’t make its way past his lips. But, that didn’t last long either. As soon as he regained his composure, he quickly looked around at his men.

“No... I care not. I’d have to do this sooner or later, anyways. Kill both of them at once!”

Lucas screamed as he thrust his finger towards Alois and Klaus.

But, not one of his men moved. They just silently looked at Lucas.

“Why!? Did you not hear what I said!? I gave you an order! Kill them at once!”

Lucas’ voice merely echoed through the lot. As the shouts and yells from the main street began to die down, it echoed time and time again off those walls.

The soldier still didn’t move. Instead, Klaus’ mouth did.

“You’re a fool, uncle. You put far too much faith in the loyalty of those you’ve bought with gold.”

The mercenaries Lucas had hired were not men who flocked to his banner after sympathizing with his ideals.

It was after his encounter with the vigilantes at the florist that Alois had noticed this. When opposed by Alois, those men abandoned the orders supposedly given to them by Franz and escaped. They didn’t believe in the ideals of what they were doing enough to stand up to Alois, instead choosing to bow and scrape before him instead as they fled.

They weren't fighting for any ideals. They followed Lucas out of opportunism, and if a more valuable patron were to reveal themselves, they weren't going to miss the opportunity.

So, what was the value in fighting for Lucas?

Money, or the promise of a position. It was easy to surmise that those who were hired from outside of Blume were in it solely for the money, as well.

Knowing that, the answer was easy.

"Do you really think you're that valuable of a boss? A Duke's house is always going to be better off than a Baron's."

"...Klaus. Why are you the one acting so proud about this?"

As Alois looked at him dubiously, Klaus just shrugged.

Only Lucas seemed to be stupefied. The soldiers that surrounded him were not his anymore. The men's gazes hadn't been waiting for his orders, but instead keeping watch on him.

"Da..."

It was Lucas who had been cornered since the very beginning. When the sword had been thrust at his neck, when Lucas appeared, when he had confessed his ambitions... Throughout it all... Klaus had kept smiling.

"Damn it...!"

Lucas' face turned red in anger. He shook with uncontrollable rage. But more than anger, he was humiliated by the situation he found himself in.

"Damn iiiit! Ahh, so be it, I'll pay two times whatever he's offering you!"

Lucas yelled, enraged. He said that before even thinking it. Pointing at Alois and Klaus he continued to cry out.

"Kill them! If you want money, then earn it! What's wrong!? Kill those men right now!!"

None of the soldiers moved. Klaus sighed at his uncle who was losing himself to his anger.

"Uncle, you're pretty slow for a Lörriich, aren't you?"

Klaus tilted up his chin, as if provoking him even more.

"You know you don't have anything close to enough money to do that. All you have right now is the long rest that's awaiting you. Rest easy for a while, uncle, and let go of that ambition of yours."

"Sh..."

Lucas groaned. "SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!" Biting his lip, he screamed up into the sky as he sank to his knees.

○

The soldiers took Lucas and Franz, their former employers, out of that empty lot.

For the time being, they were to be kept at the mansion, afterwards it could be decided what to do with them.

Before he left, Franz softly called out to Klaus.

“The words that you said to me, they were all part of your plan, weren’t they brother?”

He couldn’t read Franz’s expression. It didn’t seem like he regretted what had happened, but there was still anger there. Those jealous eyes that he had looked at Klaus with before were still there, but they seemed slightly sadder now.

“That’s the truth, isn’t it? You just needed me to shut up, so you said something like that?”

“I never once lied to you.”

Receiving Franz’s stare, Klaus answered him honestly.

“I know how much effort you’ve put in, and I know your weaknesses and strengths. I seriously do hope that you can follow me, some day.”

Franz silently looked at Klaus.

When Klaus wasn’t wearing that frivolous grin of his, his features were eerily similar to Franz’s. Even if he had a bit of a twisted personality, even if they had a troubled past, the two were definitely brothers.

“Even if you don’t believe me, at least give it a try. Give it a go for a year and then tell me again if you think I was lying. You’ve been doing uncle’s bidding for about, what, twenty years now? Surely you can at least spare me one?”

“...I’ll think about it.”

After saying that with a small voice, Franz was escorted by the soldiers out of the back alley.

With Lucas and Franz gone, only Alois, Klaus and a few of the soldiers remained in the lot.

The noise on the main boulevard had already settled down. After the ruckus had died away, there was only a serene stillness.

“Hey.”

Klaus broke it by calling out to Alois with a sigh.

“I’m sorry I got you wrapped up in all this. As expected, I wouldn’t have been fine to trust just anyone to hold a sword to my neck.”

“No, this was for the sake of Mohnton as well.”

As he said that, Alois looked down the back alley, like he was worried about what was going on in the main street.

No, it probably wasn’t the state of the street he was worried about. He was worried about whether or not Camilla was safe amidst the mess.

Well, there weren't many people brave or stupid enough to try something on the Lord's marriage candidate. Camilla herself wasn't naïve enough to try and break up a fracas like that by herself, and if she joined Victor and the others then she should have been perfectly safe.

But even if he knew that, Alois was still deeply worried.

"...You've changed, huh."

Muttering softly, Klaus sent a sidelong glance at Alois. Behind that glance that seemed full of dissatisfaction and irreverence was a slight hint of friendship.

The moment Klaus realized that himself, he frowned disgustedly. Then, he called out to Alois again.

"Hey, put out your hand. Lift it a little higher as well."

Alois blinked, puzzled. But, he obeyed Klaus' request. It was like a child obeying their parent.

– I guess this guy's never had a friend before.

Klaus kept that rude remark about the still confused looking Alois as he raised his own hand. He had hated this cold man who martyred himself for the sake of the territory.

But, now, maybe not so much.

Klaus chuckled to himself mockingly as he raised his hand up to Alois' own.

Then, slapped his palm against Alois' hand.

That dry sound echoed through the lot.

As the echoes bounced against the walls and up into the nascent spring sky, it signaled an end to all the uproar.

Of course, Camilla knew nothing about Alois and Klaus' adventures as she was busy dealing with the fallout.

After Verrat gave in, Camilla left the despondent girl with Finne before going to try and cool down the situation between the vigilantes with Victor and the other boys. She meant to do it literally and, conveniently, there was the water which flowed into a fountain in the plaza. After a few buckets full of water, enough of them regained their senses a little bit.

It goes without saying some of them didn't take kindly to it, but she wasn't alone anymore. Victor, Dieter and Otto were much more reliable when it came to muscle, compared to a certain dainty nobleman she knew.

There were also quite a few who had been knocked out in the fighting. After sprinkling a little water on their faces too, they managed to regain consciousness.

That's why, by the time the culprits Alois and Klaus finally left that back alleyway, the uproar on the main street had settled down somewhat.

○

When he saw just what a state the boulevard was in, Alois was lost for words. Klaus, meanwhile, didn't break from that characteristic careless expression of his.

Sitting in the middle of the square, Camilla was exhausted. The same could be said for Victor and his friends, who had been helping her trying to settle everyone down. Once the noise had died away and there was some element of peace again, that exhaustion had finally caught up with them.

There was barely a soul on the boulevard anymore. To tend to some of the injured, only a few of the young vigilantes had stayed behind. After the festival had been trampled underfoot by the chaos, only ruined stands and a broken stage lay in its wake. The only musical instrument that had survived was Victor's violin as well.

The band members were full of grief and the young vigilantes looked on with a deep sense of guilt. Verrat sat quietly in a corner of the square, head in hands, and not even the usually stout Camilla had anything to say.

Alois held his breath as he looked at the despondent scene in the plaza.

"C-Camilla, um..."

After running up to Camilla, Alois struggled to find what words to say to her.

But, no matter how hard he thought, he couldn't think of an excuse. To solve the issue of the Lörriich succession, he had chosen to sacrifice all this.

“Ah...”

Instead of the perfect words that he wished would come to mind, Alois could only sigh instead.

Because of their strategy, he knew that there was going to be a disturbance on the main street.

Of course, it wasn't Alois' aim to have that uproar grow out of control. He knew just how much Victor and the others had been preparing leading up to the big day, and just how much Camilla had been looking forward to it. That's why he was hoping against hope that at least the physical damage would be minimal.

But, in the end, things ended up going according to his worst-case scenario.

Or rather, it was actually worse than Alois ever imagined it could get.

“...That things ended up this way, it's all my responsibility.”

Alois decided to tell her the truth, as unsavoury as it was.

“I knew that something like this would happen from the beginning. Despite knowing that, I intentionally overlooked it. Camilla... I'm the one who ruined this for you.”

“I suppose that's about right.”

Camilla answered him quietly. Not really understanding Camilla's words, Alois tried to catch a glimpse of her expression.

Camilla looked down. Her fists were firmly clenched. Her shoulders trembling, just slightly.

“Um... This is all my fault. You know about the issue with the succession to House Lörlich? To solve that, I used this festival.”

“I suppose that's about right...!”

Her voice shaking with anger, Camilla raised her head. Seeing Camilla's strong glare, Alois jumped a little in surprise.

“I thought there might have been something like that going on! Because you were always always always always always whispering in some dark corner with Klaus! Constantly!”

“...So you noticed us?”

Alois' eyes widened a little as he looked down at Camilla. As she shook with anger, Camilla's cheeks were bright red. A deep frown creased between her eyes as she bit her lips, but that figure that Alois mistook for only reflecting Camilla's anger and regret also belied her deep sorrow.

“I just didn't know what it was you were plotting! I only thought that it was going to be something strange again! Besides, I knew there would be people who just couldn't let others enjoy the festival on the day! That's why...!”

Camilla glared straight into Alois' eyes as she spoke. That voice full of passion with which Camilla yelled seemed directed almost as much at herself as it was at Alois.

“That’s why, at the very least, when you came back, I wanted you to be able to join everyone without having to worry!”

So that everyone didn’t blame Alois. So that Alois didn’t blame himself. Everyone who worked so hard would be rewarded, and people could have fun. She wanted to protect that time when even he could enjoy himself.

Yet, Camilla couldn’t.

Yet, it all ended in misery.

Perhaps if it had been Klaus instead, he could have done better.

Perhaps if it had been Alois, he might have had a plan.

“But, in the end, I couldn’t do anything. That’s why I hate this, I hate it so much I could die...!”

Camilla felt powerless. Despite knowing there would be trouble at the festival, there was nothing she could do alone.

She had some hard feelings for Alois and Klaus, who had a hand in orchestrating all this. But, more importantly, she was furious at herself for not even being able to fulfil her wish of ‘making the festival succeed’.

Alois was surprised as he looked down at Camilla’s trembling form. He didn’t quite understand the meaning behind Camilla’s words right away. But, caught up in her momentum, he lost his words.

“I...”

In front of his eyes, Camilla was hurting. Taking the energy that would usually have a person burst into tears, she instead glared at Alois. But that sad figure only made Alois shrink away more.

Exhaling roughly, Alois managed to stay standing. He looked down at Camilla for a while.

Finally, he understood Camilla’s passion.

“I’ve... done something quite terrible, haven’t I?”

His face loosening slightly, Alois rubbed his head. Camilla still looked down.

On the ground beneath her, she could see the remains of flowers that had been trampled and torn apart by boots. Not being able to see Camilla’s face, Alois shook his head.

“To make up for... No, in the future...”

– No.

Even if they held another festival in this spot, it wouldn’t make up for Camilla’s feelings. What Camilla had wanted to cherish and protect was what was going to be held that day specifically.

Alois looked around the plaza, hoping desperately to see some clue. A desolate square. Weary and exhausted people. Band members who had lost everything they had poured their passions into. Camilla, as well as Nicole who anxiously stood by her.

Then...

“...Klaus.”

“What’s up?”

When Alois called out to him, Klaus answered with as irreverent a smirk as ever. Seeing just how appealing Alois’ eyes were, though, it soon turned into a wry grimace.

“Jeez, you sure are a needy Lord, ain’t ya? Just as payment for seeing that sad face of yours, guess I’ll have to lend you a hand. Entrust everything to this charming man, alright?”

Klaus seemed to be pleased seeing a typically unseen side of Alois. Despite the situation, his voice had a song like tone for it.

“In the first place, this festival was supposed to be for my sake, don’t you think~?”

Then, Klaus began to slowly walk. Moving past Camilla and the others, he stepped up onto the stage, glancing at the broken musical instruments.

The flute, the oboe and the drums. But, he couldn’t see the violin. Klaus didn’t know this, but because it was the only one that hadn’t been damaged, it had been put back in its case.

Not particularly bothered by the absence of the violin, Klaus picked up one of the fallen drumsticks. Sitting on top a broken drum, with the other drumstick smashed inside of it, he tapped the rim of the drum to get everyone’s attention and then raised his voice.

“Little girl, get up here!”

“...Me?”

When Klaus beckoned to her, Nicole’s eyes suddenly widened. She turned to Camilla, confused, but she didn’t find any help there. Although bashful and puzzled, Nicole climbed onto the stage, looking suspiciously at Klaus.

The snapped drumstick. The broken drum. A pot that had rolled into the plaza. A slightly larger plank of wood that was supposed to have been to set up the stalls.

“What are you planning to do?”

Nicole asked Klaus that, as he started lining up all that junk. Nicole had no idea what this man was thinking, though that wasn’t truly anything new for her. Even though that man had said ‘leave it to me’, just what exactly was he planning?

“You need music for a party, right?”

Saying that, Klaus beat all the junk in front of him with his drumstick. As he smacked each one in turn, he grinned as he looked up at Nicole.

“Alright, little girl. Sing.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve always been practicing back in the cellar. You can sing the wedding hymn, can’t you?”

Nicole blinked. She rolled over Klaus’ incomprehensible words for a moment in her head, then her face reddened as she shook her head furiously.

“I-I-I can’t! I can’t sing! Especially not in front of everyone like this!”

“It’s alright, it’s alright. If you’re that nervous, I’ll sing with you.”

“That’s not the issue here! In the first place, why does it have to be me!? It should be Miss Verra-...”

No. Verrat, who was still hunched over in the corner, hadn’t responded to anyone since.

“Ummm... Still, it shouldn’t be me, maybe Mister Victor or Mister Dieter...?”

“Who wants to hear a guy’s voice?”

“But, then, the other women are...”

Camilla or Finne or Mia. Klaus shrugged as Nicole timidly looked at each of the other women in the square.

“There’s no one else, besides you. Remember what I said? You’ve got a good voice. I like that singing voice of yours.”

Nicole bit her lip at his all too casual words. Without watching Nicole’s reaction, he smacked the rubbish in front of him once again. With each strike, an irregular but unmistakeable light rhythm echoed out into the square.

“Well, if you really hate the thought of it, then it can’t be helped. But if you don’t, then let me hear your voice, Nicole.”

Klaus was truly the world’s most selfish man.

As he just said whatever he pleased with a smile, he began to sing as he tapped away at that junk. His voice was slightly high for a man’s and wonderfully cheery... But, singing alone, it had a lonely tinge to it. Because it was a song that should have been sung at the head of five people.

“Guh,” Nicole balled her hands into fists. That hymn she had sung so many times was like an invitation all its own. She remembered the days she had spent in that cellar, practicing alongside Verrat. Klaus’ bright and cheery singing was almost goading out Nicole’s own voice.

“Uuu.... M-Mistress! This is only for my Mistress’ sake!”

Alois had entrusted it to Klaus. Even this song she didn’t understand well, it had to have some sort of meaning. Something that would cheer Camilla up. So if she lent a hand to Klaus, it was still only for Camilla’s sake. Truly.

It wasn’t because she liked to sing, or because she enjoyed raising up her voice. Honestly.

“For my Mistress’ sake, I’ll sing!”

Her cheeks flushed with colour, Nicole’s voice that Klaus thought so highly of echoed through the square.

Klaus, who watched that smile slowly creep into her face, only had one thing on his mind... It was a smile like a flower finally coming into bloom.

○

The voices of Nicole and Klaus echoed down from the stage.

– To sing that even now...

Camilla, who heard the song float through the square, bit her lip. She didn't know what Klaus' intentions were, but how could a single song salvage everything now?

Rather, the only thing those two cheerful voices were doing were highlighting just how dreary the surroundings were by comparison.

– Stop thinking like that! Even though Nicole is putting so much effort into singing as well!

Camilla shook her head to dispel those dark feelings creeping through her. Those two were singing to try and do something. Camilla knew it wouldn't do any good to sit there alone and gloomily like that.

She raised her head, hoping to try and put on a smile.

But it was then that she saw her.

Had she been drawn in by the singing voices? Camilla noticed a single girl looking at the square from the shattered main street.

The girl looked up wondrously at the stage

Was she ten years old? Other than that girl, there wasn't anyone else nearby. Had she been separated from her parents or her friends? Or did she just get lost alone in the chaos?

After gathering her thoughts, Camilla approached the lost looking little girl on the main street.

"What's the matter? Are you lost?"

When Camilla called out to her, the girl's shoulders jumped. It seemed like she was so absorbed in the sound, she didn't see Camilla coming. Those round eyes that she looked up at Camilla with seemed confused.

"Um, uh, I'm sorry. I looked without permission."

"That's okay. If you like, you can come closer to watch. Assuming you aren't lost, that is?"

"I'm not lost!"

The girl's cheeks puffed up as she pouted.

"I'm waiting for my friends. I know how to get back to my house by myself!"

"I understand, my mistake. Then, do take your time and listen... Ah, no... Wait just a minute."

As if suddenly remembering something, Camilla looked around the main street. Ruined stalls lined the sidewalks. As she looked, she tried to eye Günter's stall, that was supposed to be around here.

Günter's stand was set up in a good position, near the main square. Luckily, it hadn't been damaged too badly. Günter must have protected it well since all the cookery she could see were still in decent shape. As soon as she saw that, Camilla rushed over towards the stall.

Sitting next to his stand, Günter was all alone. He was hunched over like everyone else, exhausted. With a gloomy look towards the square, he sighed.

As he sullenly sat alone, Camilla suddenly burst onto the scene with vigour. Günter turned away from the square to frown at the sudden intruder.

"Oi, what're you doing? What happened?"

"I need to borrow your stall for a moment."

"Ha?"

Not taking any notice of the dumbfounded Günter, Camilla slipped behind the stand's counter.

The stall was tidy and neatly organized, equipped with a simple to use outdoor stove. So that the stall wouldn't burn down, the fire is completely encased. A net was spread over the charcoals, with a skewer and a bottle of sauce set up beside it.

The meat was left in a stone chest on the ground, well cooled with magical tools.

The flint was... next to the coals. As soon as she found it, Camilla lit up the oven. After skewering the meat on one of the spits, she laid it across the netting after waiting for the fire to begin burning in earnest.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Looking into the stall, Günter stared at her, perplexed. It was no wonder. He’d agreed to take part in the festival and was gearing up to finally enjoy himself, then suddenly his stall was attacked by a group of men. After finally managing to fight them off with whatever he could, the moment he took a break his stall was finally taken over by one lone invader.

“It should be simple to see if you look.”

But, Camilla’s answer seemed cold. Without turning around to look at him, she continued to grill the meat over the flame.

The meat grilling in the oven was charred with the pattern of the net beneath it. The juices from the meat dripped through the net, falling into the fire with puffs of smoke. Those juices running from the meat was a sign it still hadn’t been cooked till perfection yet.

“It should be simple to see if I...? Oi, you’ve stoked the fire too much! You’re gonna burn the damned stall down! Stop pressing the meat against the dang net! Did you even season that properly!?”

“How should I know!?”

“Argh, damn it! You tasteless woman!”

Günter scratched at his head irritably. Ignoring the man, Camilla continued to keep grilling the meat over the fire.

The oily smoke snaked its way out of the tent and carried a fragrance down the street. The girl who was standing out there suddenly turned to look at the stall where Camilla was working. After looking at it a little confused for a while, she ran up to it.

“Whaaat’cha doing?”

The girl stretched to see above the countertop and look into the stall. Although the meat ended up a little overcooked, it still looked tender and juicy. With a “Fufu~n,” Camilla took the skewer off the fire.

“Looks delicious, doesn’t it?”

“Yep...”

The girl’s eyes were firmly fixed on the skewer Camilla held.

With the girl’s rapt attention, Camilla began to glaze the meat in the sauce just to show off. The sauce was ever so slightly sweet, which alongside the already nice smell of the meat gives off an irresistible fragrance.

As expected, it seemed like the perfect way to pull customers. The girl couldn’t take her eyes off of it.

“That will be five Licht coppers.”

The coin Camilla spoke about was the lowest currency that was in circulation in Sonnenlicht. Five of those coins wouldn't be an expensive purchase, even for a commoner. It was something even children could afford.

However, the girl's shoulders slumped at those words.

"...Um, I... I don't have any money..."

"...Well, usually it would be five coppers. But today, children eat free."

The girl looked up at Camilla. Faced with those big twinkling eyes, Camilla smiled.

She was hoping that the master of the shop wouldn't get too antsy about her flexing some authority for something like this. In the first place, if things kept up like that he wouldn't have had a single customer at all.

"Thank you very much, Miss First Customer."

As she said that, Camilla held out the freshly grilled skewer.

After taking the gift, the little girl ran off, seemingly satisfied with not going to the plaza after all.

"...The first and the last customer, I suppose?"

With the girl gone, there was no longer any other potential customers both in the plaza or on the main street.

Well, at any rate, one customer was better than none. Even just having seen that one girl's eyes light up was a little reward.

The fragrant smoke continued to waft up the street. Taking no notice of Günter, who continued to try and lecture her about how to properly cook skewered meat, Camilla smiled, a little lonely.

But, after dark... Children truly are wily, after all.

Eventually, that girl came back, and with lots of friends in tow.

"We heard that children get to eat for free."

There was a big group of children, all around ten years old. Amongst them, a boy who was probably the leader of their little group spoke up cheekily.

"It should be free even with this many, right? Please give everyone some."

There were more than eleven or twelve people in their group. In fact, she saw more coming. Had she gathered all the children her age from around Blume? Giving away that many skewers for free would easily wipe out any hope of a profit margin, normally.

"Aren't you plucky?"

"Hmph," Camilla crossed her arms behind the stall's counter.

Camilla remembered the face of the cheeky brat in front of her. He was one of Klaus' 'teachers' that they had come across, not long after coming to Blume originally.

"You, you're Klaus' 'mischief teacher', aren't you? You truly are just as bad a boy as I imagined... Did Klaus tell you to come here?"

As Camilla looked at the boy suspiciously, he returned a stubborn stare. Even though he was young, it seemed like he had just as much of that Blume attitude as the adults in this town.

"What kind of attitude is that towards your customers? When you said children eat free, was that a lie?"

"It was not a lie at all. Very well, I'll have you all eat for free. However! In return, you have to eat your skewer whilst listening to the singing in the square!"

At Camilla's shout, the children suddenly cheered.

They slapped each other's hands in a way that Camilla had never seen before.

Throughout the trampled ruins of the destroyed festival, children's laughter echoed. It may have taken a different form, but in its own way, this is what Camilla had dreamed of.

From that point on, everything was oddly busy.

It was hard work cooking skewers for all those children. “Argh, I can’t bear to look at this!”, Günter said in the meantime, and began to grill meat together beside Camilla.

“You coarse girl! Do you even know what it means to be delicate with food!?”

“I’m coarse, you say!? Those eyes of yours must be painted on!”

“Just throwing such succulent meat on the grill haphazardly like that, how can you be anything but!? Argh, damn it! I’ll train you from scratch, lass!!”

“Are you saying these skewers aren’t delicious!? I didn’t need any instruction from you to do this much!!”

“Save the cheek for when you can actually outcook me! You’ll be regettin’ this when we’re back in the kitchen, ya hear!?”

As they kept up their usual screaming match whilst cooking those skewers for the children, the ones that had already received theirs began to walk towards the town square, chatting happily to one another.

After some time, the children’s mothers came.

They must have come looking for their children who had gone out to play. After finding their children in the plaza or wandering down the main street, they eventually found themselves at the stall as well after seeing what their children were eating, as if following the scent.

“So there really was a festival going on after all, then? It’s somewhat different to what I imagined it to be.”

As she said that, one of the mothers looked around the main street, with all of its busted and trampled stalls. Looking at the street, Camilla could only see it as vandalized, but perhaps people who had never seen a festival before might see it differently.

“...Those really do like quite delicious don’t they? My kid also had one... Um...”

“Adults have to pay five pieces. Only kids get free food, right?”

The boy who had led his mother over by the hand said that with a proud grin. The mother seemed to be at a loss for a moment, but eventually gave in to her curiosity and bought one.

As they cooked it over the grill, another person came up to the stall. Günter’s plan of attracting customers through smell may have paid off after all.

Some of the people approached the stall out of sheer curiosity. And after some time, that curiosity would turn into custom. Eventually, the stream of curiosity seekers and customers became a torrent.

“One please.”

At the call, Camilla repeated the price, something she’d lost count of how many times she’d said.

“They are five Licht coppers each.”

“Oh? They cost money?”

When she raised her head at the sound of that stingy voice, she saw a face she knew staring into the stall. It wasn't the sort of person she was expecting, being a pale and elderly man. His white hair was disheveled and the clothes he wore little more than rags. As she looked at the destitute looking old man, Camilla felt the words leave her lips before she could think.

“You, you're Klaus' poetry teacher, aren't you?”

The root of all evil. He was the one who had originally requested Klaus solve the issue of the underground music that disturbed him.

“I remember you. You were with Klaus, weren't you? I'll take three then. If'n ya don't mind.”

“Do you have any money? Buying three wouldn't be cheap for you, would it? You can have it for free.”

It was easy to tell that the old man was someone in need just by looking at him. People who live for the sake of their passion usually find it hard to earn a living. All the more so in Mohnton, a land that scorns such things, there was no way he would have any money.

“Don't treat me like a charity case. I've already paid for three in advance. I'll take two more as well, I'll sort something out to pay for those as well.”

He was also incredibly stubborn.

“You're a troublesome fellow, aren't you!? Well, in that case... So be it. One of your songs, then. In exchange, I'll make you as many as you like.”

“One of my songs? Alright, then. I'll give you *another* of my songs.”

Saying that, the old man glanced back at the square.

The bubbling noise of the children had calmed down a little bit. It seemed like Klaus was the one singing now. Then, with a final wave, he gave up his position on the stage.

And the one who walked up to replace him was... Victor. He took a deep breath, a hand on his chest, then took up his violin.

“That god awful din sure has come a long way, hasn't it?”

As the old man received his skewers from Camilla, a smile spread across that stubborn face as he headed towards the square.

○

Victor had gone up onto the stage.

Dieter, Finne and Otto had all left as well.

In that tent, in the corner of the square, only Verrat and Mia were left.

As she hugged her knees to her chest, Verrat's breathing stayed shallow.

– I'm going now.

When he was invited by Klaus, who had been singing on the stage all that time, Victor decided to take to the stage himself. But when he said that to Verrat, she didn't even raise her face to look at him.

– My violin, thank you for not breaking it... Your feelings, I'm sorry I can't return them. But, still, thank you.

Even when Victor had said that, Verrat still couldn't raise her head. As Victor left, and the others followed him, she still stayed in the same position.

– Vera, we're going too.

Dieter called out to Verrat before leaving.

– You should come along as well, when you can. Cause, y'know, Miss Nicole will get tired soon as well... and we all like your singing.

No one hurled their frustrations at Verrat. They didn't say anything about her ruining the day or breaking their instruments.

But even though they tried to comfort her, Verrat couldn't bear to see them.

Nearby, she heard a sigh.

Without raising her face, she knew it came from Mia. There wasn't anyone else in the tent at all. Just what kind of eyes was Mia looking at Verrat with? She didn't want to know.

In the distance, she could hear Victor's violin. The noise of the square seemed so far away.

“...I don't feel sorry for you at all.”

In the tent that felt cut off from the outside world, Mia sounded as if she were speaking to herself.

“I knew you loved Victor. I knew you'd always loved him for the longest time. But, I won't hand him over to you. That's because I love Victor as well.”

Even though she couldn't see it, she could feel Mia's gaze. Those hard words she sent Verrat's way didn't have an inch of the sympathy that her friends had.

“What you did was despicable. Doing something like that, how could you ever capture Victor's heart? Lashing out just to hurt people, then making it seem like you're the one who was hurt the most, I can't stand to see it.”

Verrat hugged her knees even more tightly. She had nothing she could say. Those words were painful to hear.

“Even though the people you hurt are trying to reach out to you, you're still acting like the victim, it's unsightly... Honestly, just really unsightly. You're making those people who are worried about you look like the biggest fools.”

Mia breathed out an angry sigh. Unsightly. Verrat felt her shoulders jump at the word. It was like a direct assault on the pride she had carried herself with all this time.

She had always worn her heart on her sleeve and been proud of it. She always thought she carried herself with grace. When she found out that Victor and Mia had gotten engaged, she wished them happiness without letting her feelings show.

Jealousy was ugly. Clinging to him would be wretched. She didn't want to be like Camilla from the stories. She wanted to be cool, admirable and graceful.

But, that wasn't truly Verrat.

"You played music with Victor, you were his precious friend. When I thought about how you were experiencing something with him that I couldn't, I was disgusted at how jealous I felt. I was miserable."

"...I was hurting as well."

She was alive. She had feelings. So, it was only natural that she was hurt. Verrat managed to squeeze out her voice.

"I know that. You wouldn't be human, otherwise."

Mia exhaled. She still looked straight at Verrat.

But Verrat didn't realize the envy in that gaze.

"You were always so cool. Even if you were hurt, you still stayed proud and calm. When I saw how much Victor admired you, I was jealous."

Love, pain, grief, hatred... those sorts of emotions were all natural. They were impossible to just will away. Everyone has to come to terms with them, either face to face or within themselves.

They might become unsightly and clingy, or anxious and insecure, or lose themselves to jealousy or hatred.

But Verrat chose not to confront her feelings and remained proud. She didn't accept anyone else's sympathy, nor did she ever let her pain show.

That was the cool Verrat that Mia had always envied.

"So, are you going to stay like this forever?"

Mia asked her.

As she hugged her knees, Verrat bit her lip. Tears began to stain her skirt.

Crying like this wasn't cool at all.

But, running away from her friends just to hide her tears, that was even worse.

○

Following the children, more and more people began to gather in the square and even the cooks and peddlers whose stalls had been destroyed were beginning to filter back.

As the younger vigilantes began to rebuild the broken stalls apologetically, trade began to flow down the main street. After that, even more people began to gather.

Thanks to that, Camilla's stall also stayed busy.

Before anyone knew it, the street was chock full of people.

The children were louder than anyone. After Nicole stepped off the stage after a while, the young musicians began to play their broken instruments, ever so slightly off-key.

Amongst the music, a smooth yet strong singing voice echoed. At the sound of the song that no one in the crowd had heard before, applause broke out.

In one corner of the square, a group of people swept up in the mood began to dance. Someone who liked the song tried to sing along. Those happy voices trailed up into the sky, as if heralding the beginning of spring.

But, Camilla, who was busier than ever cooking with Günter in the stall, didn't know about any of that.

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Eventually, Günter couldn't stand it anymore and sent Camilla away.

"Be sure to remember this!"

And, after yelling that back into the stall, she began to walk down the main street. After that, she was caught up in various crowds and mobbed by people...

Eventually, after escaping to a quieter corner of the town square, Camilla finally managed to take a rest.

Looking up at the stage from the square, the band of young musicians were playing a cheerful tune. Just below the stage, the children hopped up and down in their own sort of dance. Those other people near the stage, were they cheering or jeering? She couldn't make out their voices from here. Near the entrance to the square, a group of young girls were making garlands of flowers.

With all the commotion, there was no one to bother anyone deciding to take a break in a shady corner of the square.

Camilla sat down on one of the flowerbeds that marked out the plaza's border. The flower bed was full of those beautiful white 'flowers of desire', that were also a key ingredient in Blume's perfumes.

Looking up, she could see similar beds of those white flowers dotting the main street as well. As the wind rustled through the square, the white petals shimmered and swayed as if in a dance.

It truly was a town full of flowers.

As she watched the petals shake in the breeze, Camilla sighed and turned to the person next to her. It was a person who seemed to have been here before Camilla arrived. Someone who must have wanted to think about a lot on their own.

"...Lord Alois, are you also taking a break?"

Camilla called out to Alois, who was staring off into the distance.

Alois, who usually dressed like a stiff aristocrat, was wearing casual and loose-fitting clothes, the type she had never seen him wear. Of course, Camilla had no idea that it was actually the uniform of Lucas' private soldiers. He had taken off the jacket which was the main identifier of the uniform, only wearing the slightly ill-fitting shirt underneath.

"I've been sent away from everywhere. Everyone is just so selfish! They would mob me, get me to help a little bit, then they just move me on!"

Alois silently turned to look at Camilla as she pouted. Camilla didn't seem to notice how cold he seemed.

"Günter took back his stall, so I thought I could at least help with the flowers like I had wanted to in the beginning. The garlands... see, the children are doing them now. But even that too! It was taken away by the florist! You see!?"

Camilla pointed at the proprietress of the floristry in another corner of the square. She had gathered children around her, teaching them how to make garlands and wreaths. Originally that was Camilla's job, but since the florist had a lot more know-how and tricks up her sleeve when it came to teaching, one way or another her place was taken.

Instead, an excellently made garland of flowers made by that same florist now sat atop Camilla's head. As much as Camilla fumed, it was certainly much more skillfully made than anything she could do.

"After that, I tried to help Mia re-sew the ruined costumes for the band. But she said that she wouldn't let me sew, so instead, she made me model everything she was sewing like I was some kind of doll! After that, I fell in with the vigilantes, and after that, it was the turn of all the stall owners!"

As an apology, they always gave her something from their stall out of gratitude. As a result, Camilla's arms were full of sweets and fruits of all kinds. When she could barely hold onto the amount she had been given anymore, she tried to find Nicole to help her, but eventually gave up when she couldn't find a trace of her anywhere.

As Camilla seethed in frustration, Alois still looked at her silently. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it straight away on second thought.

"What's more, I met a lot of Klaus' 'teachers'. The child who taught him pranks and the old man who was his poetry teacher, also that one teaching the children near the stage, that must be his dance teacher? I also met that drama teacher of his on the main street as well! I decided to question him since I had free time, after all! I had a feeling he was involved in Klaus' theatrics!"

Once the uproar on the main street had settled down, disguising himself as a regular festival-goer to come and see... and, well. Camilla remembered the words of the dramatist who divulged everything after being faced down by her glare. Klaus had never intended to let the festival end in complete failure.

Whilst he would use it to his own ends, he had intended to manage the ramifications as well. Of course, it sounded good, but it was small comfort to those who had to live through those consequences.

That being said, if it wasn't for Klaus, there wouldn't have been a festival at all. But, that only made Camilla dislike the whole sordid affair even more.

"It really is vexing! That fox! The whole time I was trying to calm things down with Victor and the others, I was wondering... I really ought to give him a piece of my mind!"

After calming down the fighting on the main street and before Alois and Klaus returned, it had been unbearable.

Verrat had hunched over and wasn't responding to anyone, whilst Victor and the rest were exhausted and depressed. The young vigilantes were utterly remorseful that they had played a role in destroying what they had tried to protect, whilst the stall keepers were in shock at everything they'd lost.

After that, they had to clean up the shattered remains of the festival. Victor and his friends' instruments had been bent and broken, and whilst considering what to think about doing with Verrat, it didn't seem like there was any hope for the festival to continue. That's what she had thought.

But now, Victor and the others were playing their instruments as best they could upon the stage. They were wearing the jackets and dresses that had been sewn back together in a rush, and were standing in front of all those spectators in the plaza. Verrat sang alongside them, tears still streaking her face. The business owners were returning to the stalls, people were beginning to gather, and now the main street was filled with light and laughter.

She was disappointed at how things had gone... but, in a way, this is what Camilla had always wanted.

"Hmph," Camilla snorted with her nose, raising her chin up. And, as Alois looked at that seemingly haughty attitude of hers, she glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

"...But, maybe this isn't the time for that?"

She said she wanted to complain, but she decided not to in the end.

It's true that the festival she had worked hard on had been ruined.

It's also true that Verrat had deeply hurt the people around her. As long as there were people wounded by her actions, she couldn't ever easily forgive Verrat. Later on, something would have to be done about her.

Camilla didn't feel sorry for her. She acted for her own sake, so she should also own the consequences. She should face up and take responsibility for her actions properly, then when she returns to see her friends, she can stand tall.

Alois thought the same way.

"...Camilla."

"Yes..."

Camilla answered straight away, as Alois called out to her quietly.

The Alois who looked Camilla's way didn't have that normal gentle smile painted across his face. He looked almost wooden, expressionless.

However, buried somewhere in that mask, there was something troubling hidden away.

"Lord Alois, I... I was truly looking forward to today."

Hearing it like an admonishment, Alois nodded meekly.

"I know."

"I wanted you to enjoy yourself, Lord Alois. I said as much, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"But, it seems like I was the only one who really thought that way, wasn't I?"

Even if the outcome was positive, Camilla wasn't so saintly to forgive and forget everything that happened. If anything, Camilla was the type to hold a grudge. She couldn't easily forget any perceived wrong, and if she can't reach a satisfying conclusion for that ill, it would take root in her heart. If she

wasn't that kind of person, she would never have hatched the idea to slim Alois down and parade him back around the capital in the first place.

"Lord Alois, I... I'm angry."

She might even be angrier than Alois realized. Alois and Klaus knew just how much Camilla was looking forward to something like this, perhaps even before Klaus proposed the idea of the festival, and the idea that they were just using that to their advantage wasn't far-fetched.

Even if they made up for it afterwards, it didn't change the fact that it had happened.

"Do you not have anything to say?"

"...I do."

Alois nodded as he looked at Camilla.

Even though he was a big man, the way he looked up at her was like a young boy being scolded.

Alois faltered for a moment, as if looking for the right words.

"...Iboku..."

He tore his gaze away from Camilla, staring at the ground. Camilla couldn't quite understand what he was thinking as she looked at him.

"Camilla, I don't really understand people's feelings."

"I cannot argue with that."

"I do somewhat understand how it is that people think. What sort of moves could they make? Or what are their aims?"

He was quite a shrewd man, especially for his age. Alois had always been good at discerning others' thoughts from their tones, their mannerisms, their expressions. What they say, and what they left unsaid. He understood joy and sorrow like two sides of a coin. He knew what people expected, and what he could expect of them.

"But, I never had any hesitation when it came to stepping on them. I knew that this time as well. About you, Camilla, and the band members. Perhaps, to a degree, I even understood what Verrat was thinking."

Alois gripped his hands into fists as they rested on his knees. The music and laughter in the distance only served to make Alois' sullen tone stand out even more.

"But, even so, I still chose to sacrifice them. Because I thought that going down that road would be better for Mohnton. That it would be better to sacrifice the needs of the few for the benefit of the many."

Alois' line of thinking wasn't exactly wrong. Even if Camilla didn't know what Alois hid from her and did in the shadows, she knew that Alois wasn't the type of person to act callously. He weighed the

options presented to him, and chose the most obvious course of action. She understood that was the type of person he was.

“If it’s for the benefit of the territory or its people, I won’t hesitate. If it were you, or Klaus, or even myself, the sacrifice would always be worth it... maybe even if that sacrifice meant death. What matters to me the most is the territory left to me by my father and mother... I’m sure that’s the reason Klaus hates me, because he knows what I’m truly like?”

“...But, Lord Alois, you still chose Klaus because you like him, didn’t you?”

“That’s because he’s a good man – he’s clever and knows how to win people’s trust. The reason I like him is that he would be good for the land.”

– To that extent...?

As Alois said that, Camilla was lost for words.

It was as if he judged things entirely on whether or not they were useful to him. It was like a craftsman picking his tools. Even if they may cry or weep, in the end, they’re only damaged tools. Even if he understood, it was as if he lacked any true empathy. It was too distant, too impersonal... as if he was barely a human at all?

“Camilla... until I met you, I’d never truly been angry.”

“...Yes?”

“And, I’d never truly loved someone.”

“Ah...” Camilla let out a breath. He had given those words so little fanfare that she felt restless. This was how Alois did things, wielding his goodwill like a blunt object. Perhaps that was a reflection of how ignorant he was when it came to other’s feelings?

“Up until now, I’d never truly had strong feelings for anyone. I never wanted to hurt anyone, but I convinced myself that it was necessary for the good of the land, so I told myself I had no choice... but...”

Alois’ words trailed off. Then, he raised his head, once again looking at Camilla.

“I regret it.”

He looked straight into Camilla’s eyes. That solemn face seemed to be overflowing with guilt.

“Not just today, but everything up until now. I’m sure I’ve hurt you in even more ways than I can imagine, haven’t I?”

“Lord Alois...”

“If I could do everything over from the beginning, I would. In the past, I treated you like some piteous thing and only went along with you out of sympathy, always thinking of it as a chore. And today, despite knowing just how much you were looking forward to this, I chose to let it be trampled on. If it weren’t for Klaus, I’m not sure I’d ever have been able to see your smile again. I regret it all.”

“Mu,” Camilla held her tongue. Alois had locked her gaze firmly in his. Camilla, meanwhile, could barely stand it.

– How frustrating.

Camilla bit her lip, slowly blinking as if trying to escape. Then, after taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and her heart towards Alois.

“Lord Alois.”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to apologize?”

“Yes. For today, and everything up until now. I’m sorry for everything that I’ve put you through.”

“In the future, can you not try to martyr yourself and others for the sake of the land anymore? Not just myself, but Klaus and everyone else.”

“...I’ll do my best.”

It didn’t seem like he was willing to commit to that point just yet. Alois was still a Lord, after all. Doing everything he could to protect the land was a part of his duty.

Therefore, it would at least be a start if he would worry more about it in the future. If he would at least hesitate. That would certainly have an impact on the types of decisions Alois would make from now on.

“Alright, I understand!”

With a strong nod, Camilla suddenly jumped to her feet.

“I’ll accept your apology for today! Since I’ve accepted it, then that concludes everything!”

As he looked up at Camilla, Alois was torn between surprise and relief. Then, Camilla took Alois’ hand.

“For now, let’s have some fun! That’s what today was all about, after all!”

“Umm, Camilla...?”

Lead by Camilla, Alois stood up as well. For some reason, Alois couldn’t resist the strange strength that hand had over him.

“Let’s spread the fun around. Let’s let everyone find something precious to them. I’m sure that you’ll only come to love this land even more.”

And in that way... instead of thinking about people merely as tools or sacrifices for the greater good, perhaps he’d first think about saving them instead.

It wasn’t just that the idea of the territory was important to protect. Wasn’t it better to think of protecting the territory for all the precious people and things within its borders?

“Let’s dance, Lord Alois. We’ve gone through a lot to get here, after all.”

“But, I’ve never danced before...”

“Even a child that has just learned to walk can dance. All you have to do is move your feet to the rhythm!”

Camilla’s small hand that held Alois’ seemed almost impossible to throw off.



As she led him out of that lonely corner of the square, the two of them emerged into the center of all the music and laughter.

“It’s the meat lady!” “Stop that at once!” As soon as the children saw Camilla, they piped up. But even Alois, who wasn’t good when it came to others’ feelings, realized that the nickname only had good intentions behind it.

The broken instruments kept playing those out of tune melodies. It would be hard to call it good, but the song intended for a wedding day was bright and cheerful. Camilla took both of Alois’ hands, spinning around and around in time with the tune.

To Alois, it just felt like he was being swung around. As he barely kept up with Camilla, the children nearby poked fun at him. The happy laughter mixed in with the sounds of joy that echoed all through the main street.

A spring wind blew, swaying the flowers that lined the road. As the petals danced on the breeze around them, Camilla laughed as she watched Alois try to match her steps.

The garlands of white petaled flowers seemed to shine, nestled in her raven black hair. Her long, unbraided locks that swung in time with the music were beautiful.

Even as tears streamed down her face, she wore a brilliant smile.

Alois couldn’t figure out just how that smile was so bright, without even a hint of sadness.

As they danced, the clear spring sky stretched out endlessly overhead.

Was this truly fine?

Mohnton was a land of frugality. It avoided ostentatious and vulgar displays, warded off vice and idleness, rewarding diligence and hardwork.

Pleasure seekers are quick to fall, dedicating oneself to playing around was treacherous and embracing such things would stagnate the land.

What Klaus had done was a revolt against history itself. Mohnton had no need for celebrations. No need for things such as festivals. Simply because it was held ostensibly for the cause of ‘Celebrating Klaus’ Appointment as Heir’, that was hardly reason to permit it.

At the very least, none of the leaders of the Lörrieh house stretching back all the way to its inception had ever held such a festival. Although it was true that the culture of this town was somewhat more relaxed than others in this land, it was still a part of Mohnton. It was meant to be a land of patience and puritanism.

But in one fell and reckless display, Klaus had destroyed the truly held traditions of this town.

Of all people, it was Klaus. Of all people...

It was his son.

“Choosing Klaus really might end up being a mistake after all.”

Rudolph held his head, trembling at the thought of what he had done.

To think that the traditions that his ancestors of House Lörrieh held sacred would be completely undone within his lifetime... He never thought that deciding who would hold power after he was gone would have such deep implications as this.

And what’s more, by his own hand. It was he himself who had decided not to interfere in Klaus’ festival.

“He’s a smart boy, but I spoiled him too much. He’s too selfish, and what’s more I don’t think I can go against him now...”

Rudolph shifted restlessly in his chair, blinking.

What would the other families think of him now? Would the Lörrieh family fall, as the Brandts had done before them? Rudolph wondered if he too would be stripped of his peerage and forced out of his home, forced to roam through Mohnton in the shadows.

Neither the Meyerheim nor the Ende families want there to be any change in Mohnton. Would they make Rudolph out to be a traitor, and cast him down?

“I really should have just chosen Franz after all? Ah, but then, brother would...”

Rudolph’s relationship with Lucas had long since soured. Lucas despised his younger brother, and Rudolph was petrified of his elder. The cause for such a bitter relationship was obvious; Rudolph had

become the head of the household, a title that the elder brother, Lucas, was convinced belonged to himself.

Just why did Rudolph, clearly the weaker of the two, come to inherit the family name over him? After being bullied by him from a young age, perhaps Rudolph wished to reveal just what an awful person his brother was by exposing him? Or, perhaps, he truly just wanted to be the head of the family more than anything?

Or, perhaps...

"Sister..."

Rudolph called out to her.

"Sister, what should I do? Please tell me what you think, like always..."

"You didn't make the wrong decision, Rudolph. Don't worry."

In Rudolph's private room, as the sun began to sink below the horizon, Gerda took her younger brother's hand in hers, as they both sat next to the fireplace.

"If you made Franz your successor, then this house would be dominated by that malicious fool of a brother of ours, Lucas. That man would have rule of Franz's ear, and you would find yourself driven out before long."

Her hands were wrinkled, but they were full of a certain strength. As Rudolph hesitated, her unshakeable words showed him the way.

"Don't worry."

Her eyes looked straight into Rudolph's. Their relationship hadn't changed since they were children. She had chosen Rudolph, not his older brother, and helped lead him to become the head of the family.

"Have I ever lead you astray before?"

As he met Gerda's gaze, Rudolph shook his head. He finally felt a sense of encouragement at her words. A sense of relief. She had always been on Rudolph's side.

That gaze with which she looked at her brother, no one other than Rudolph ever saw it.

They were not the cold eyes with which she regarded Lord Montchat.

Neither were they the sharp eyes with which she glared at the likes of Klaus.

It was only he who saw those truly kind eyes of Gerda's. That's what Rudolph believed.

"...You're right, sister. It's just as you say. I didn't make the wrong decision at all."

As Rudolph clasped his other hand over Gerda's, he smiled with a whisper.

– It'll be alright. So long as my sister is with me.

There was nothing to be afraid of. There was no need to worry. He wouldn't have to lose himself to his fretting.

He would never doubt anything that his sister said. Ever since they had been children, that had always been the case.

– I saw something truly harrowing.

Tomorrow was the final day of her stay in Blume before returning to the Duchy's capital. She had already said her goodbyes to Victor and her others and packed her things, so all that remained was to wait for the sun to rise tomorrow. She felt restless in her room for some reason, so she decided to seek out that balcony once again to feel the cool night's wind in her hair.

As she passed through the mansion's corridors, Camilla stumbled upon something unbelievable.

At the end of the hallway, she could see the current head of the family, Rudolph's room, which was on the same floor as her own. As she stood nearby, she could see Rudolph and Gerda together, talking about something or other.

When Camilla, Alois, Nicole and the rest of the retinue returned to the Montchat estate tomorrow, Gerda would be coming back with them. At first glance, it seemed like a brother and sister simply bidding each other farewell.

That alone wasn't any cause for alarm. When it came to Gerda and Rudolph talking with one another, Camilla had seen that countless times during her stay.

But, seeing the smile on Gerda's face when she talked to Rudolph, the warmth in her eyes... it stopped Camilla in her tracks.

Gerda and Rudolph kept talking for some time.

Perhaps because she was a little further down the hall, the two of them never noticed Camilla. Camilla, meanwhile, couldn't hear her conversation well.

But, something about those two sitting with one another stood out to her.

That willful woman, who seemed more iron than flesh, suddenly seemed so human. Whenever Rudolph said anything, Gerda's smile seemed so full of kindness as she answered back. She looked less like his older sister, and more of something closer to a mother.

– So, she's kind to her family?

It may have seemed like a normal thing to anyone else, but when it came to Gerda, Camilla thought that hell would have frozen over before she saw that woman look at anyone like that, much less her family.

Whilst they were in Blume, Camilla had not even once seen her look at members of her family like that. Neither Klaus nor Franz had been given any sort of warmth, and she treated the servants here just the same as she did the ones back in the capital. When others could see them, she only exchanged the barest of words with Rudolph, that was the feeling she got, whilst there was no mistaking her abject hostility towards Lucas.

But now it seems that Gerda truly did hold her younger brother dear to her, as she held his hand so warmly, and sometimes even laughed softly at his words. She always seemed so cold, but perhaps that was just a mask that she wore?

Maybe this is who she truly was? No matter how cold she might seem, no person lived without any sort of emotion. She knew that. She knew that all too well, but...

“...It’s surprising, isn’t it?”

She definitely was surprised. Surprised by the sudden voice in her ear that almost caused Camilla to cry out in shock as goosebumps ran up her arm.

As she barely managed to hold back a scream, Camilla whirled around to see who had said that. Of course, she already had an idea before she even saw him.

“Klaus!? Do not surprise me like that!”

Even though her whispering voice was obviously angry, Klaus merely shrugged.

He still had a black eye and several bruises on his face from where Franz had pummeled him. But all the same, he didn’t seem to be too concerned about himself, as he smiled at Camilla as frivolously as ever.

“Now, now. You’re wondering about my aunt, aren’t you? That person usually doesn’t seem to have much going on by way of feelings, after all.”

“Hmph,” Camilla didn’t say yes or no, simply turning her head up at him. Although Gerda was Camilla’s natural enemy, she was also Klaus’ aunt. And indeed, she was stunned by what was playing out in front of her eyes.

But, Klaus wasn’t really asking a question. Ignoring Camilla’s reaction, he continued.

“That’s why it must be such a shock to see her acting so kind like that, huh? Well, think of it as something like a Lörriich speciality. Thanks to that, it seems as if my old man is completely under her spell.”

If you can know a person’s heart, you can move their mind. Members of the Lörriich family have long since been good at such things. However, it would be a strange irony to only use that speciality on a member of your own family.

“Honestly, that person really is a scary one.”

Klaus grimaced as he looked in Gerda’s direction. As he looked at Rudolph, Klaus muttered in a voice so low that not even Camilla could hear it.

“I wondered if that person was targeting the Montchat family... But, then why bother coming into conflict with my uncle...? Am I overthinking things...?”

—

As she looked at Klaus, whose smile had turned bitter as his hand covered his mouth, Camilla’s face was even more bitter still.

Even though he was the one who called out to her, suddenly he had a deeply troubled look on his face, so Camilla couldn't help but feel awkward. After Gerda and Rudolph left, Camilla shifted uncomfortably on her feet.

Camilla whispered to Klaus, who still seemed lost in thought.

"What are you doing here in the first place?"

At Camilla's irritated voice, a smile sprang back to Klaus' face. He must have realized that showing his feelings so obviously on his face like that had been a mistake. In an unusual display for him, he scratched the back of his head like he was embarrassed.

"Ahh... Well, I came to see you. I was thinking of saying goodbye, after all."

"...Goodbye?"

"You're going back home tomorrow, aren't you?"

Camilla nodded.

They were leaving with the light of the dawn tomorrow and, assuming there were no delays, they would be back in the capital after two days by carriage. It was not a distance that could be travelled casually, so she would have to assume it would be quite some time before she next saw Blume.

"You won't be coming back with us?"

"This town is my home. Moreover, it's become even more of my home as of late, so I could hardly pack up and leave now."

Klaus said that with a cheerful grin. Camilla blinked, then finally realized what he truly meant. It was only natural, after thinking about it. Klaus was never truly a person who belonged in the capital, after all.

"...I suppose I'll miss you?"

"It makes me happy to hear you say that. Well, honestly, it was strange that he ever had me cooking in the first place. If that guy overworked me, I could've just gone and made a name for myself in the royal capital, y'know?"

It may have been a joke, but Klaus genuinely did understand why Alois was intent on keeping him in the Duchy's capital.

As long as Klaus was still breathing, there were going to be men paid to put an end to him. It was only in the capital, in his own residence, that Alois truly felt secure in protecting him. It wouldn't have been easy for Lucas to strike at the very seat of the Montchat family's power. He gave him the role of a chef as cover, but other than that he was free to do as he liked.

"You're a dishonest one. That being said, you were a surprisingly good cook."

He was merely a cook in name, and didn't really have any obligation to ever work in the kitchen. But, he was a shockingly talented chef, even if he was a Skipping Devil. Perhaps, he didn't hate living in the capital either.

“Well, I’m still a man of Mohnton myself, so it’s hard to say that I hate cooking.”

When Camilla pointed that out, Klaus blushed slightly.

“...That said, I’m still a bit scared of that guy’s diet.”

“Scared?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just overthinking things too much. Another Lörriich bad habit.”

Klaus shook his head as Camilla eyed him suspiciously. Then, he cracked a grin as he smiled at Camilla.

“Besides, it’s not all that bad being a great chef? The only source of entertainment in Mohnton is cooking, after all. It makes it quite a lot easier to woo a girl... like this.”

With that, Klaus suddenly pulled out a little white case, as if from thin air. Then, he held out that white case that fit in the palm of his hand towards Camilla.

“...What’s this?”

“I’m giving it to you. Open it.”

Camilla was slightly confused but nevertheless took the white case from Klaus’ hand. The beautifully decorated case resembled a small jewellery box. But, it was so light. As if there were truly nothing inside. But, when she finally opened it, she understood why.

The inside of the box was packed full of white flowers. White flowers, candied with sugar. They were so neatly picked that each of the petals was perfectly immaculate. Was that smell the flowers themselves, or the sugar preserving them? There was something familiar about that slightly sweet smell that wafted from the box.

“They’re so pretty, how amazing...! These are... Sehnsucht flowers!”

Those flowers that only bloomed in Klaus’ greenhouse over the winter months, but now bloomed all throughout the town. Those many layered petals weren’t suitable for a simple method of preservation, it must have been a lot of trouble to candy this many of them. Camilla couldn’t help but be amazed.

“You truly are skilled, aren’t you? They’re so pretty and delicate, I’m not sure I can even bring myself to eat them. Can I truly have these?”

“Yeah. I made them for you, after all.”

Klaus looked happy as a smile spread across Camilla’s face.

“The Sehnsucht, the flower of desire... in truth, I had desired you as well.”

But, well... he wasn’t so monstrous as to try and rob his friend of the woman he truly loved. So, his desire would be lost to time. Like a flower, preserved in sugar.

As Camilla didn’t hear the words he whispered to himself, Klaus smiled at her again.

“Take care of Alois for me. Once I’ve wrapped things up here, I’ll come and mess with you again.”

“As insolent as ever.”

Camilla glared at the man who laughed boldly. He was frivolous and rude. That rash attitude of his had always bothered Camilla, ever since they had first met.

– But, Klaus really is a good man, after all.

“Since you’re a self-proclaimed genius, I am sure this won’t keep you long. Don’t keep me waiting!”

As Camilla proudly declared that with a haughty grin, Klaus couldn’t keep his laughter in anymore. How rude can one man be?

But even whilst Camilla frowned at him reproachfully, Klaus laughed happily, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye.

The daughter of Count Storm, Camilla Storm, is a woman who brings ruin.

Not only had she twisted the mind of Duke Montchat, but she had also caused Einst to abandon their principals and now her poison had seeped even into the town of Blume as well.

That villainess' evil words had snaked into the ears of the innocent people of Blume, causing them to riot and engage in all sorts of taboo acts. Because of that despicable woman, Camilla, Mohnton's hallmarked traditions of abstinence and temperance were being eroded.

Those people who were once righteous cast aside their history, drowning in a filthy sea of vice and pleasure. They lost themselves to it so much they could not even see the evil in front of their eyes.

Sometimes people move more readily for the carrot than the stick. The people of Mohnton were beginning to be taken in by Camilla's wicked vice.

These acts couldn't simply be ignored anymore.

If anything, *that woman* should have never been able to open her mouth in the first place.

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In the preparation area that connects the kitchen to the dining room, cupboards were lined up one against the other without a single gap in that semi-subterranean room. Expensive dishes and glasses lined all the shelves and were dazzling to behold. Especially for the younger maids who weren't used to seeing such luxury before their eyes.

Pure white salt and sugar, refined to near perfection, were piled up in bags in the corner of the room. There were containers full of exotic spices, as well as jars filled with various types of honey and jams. The dishes brought up from the kitchen were properly seasoned here before being served to the master of the house, Duke Alois.

The final preparations for Alois' dishes were the jobs of the more senior ranking servants. The job of a newly hired young maid in the preparation area was simply to scurry about and find whichever dish or piece of cutlery the head maid sent her to retrieve.

Right now, she was after a plain, deep dish plate, painted blue. Although it was sturdy and would likely survive a fall, it seemed like a fairly modest thing to grace the table of a noble lord. However, because a skilled painter had been found recently, it had been decided that some of the dishes would be redecorated.

The plate the girl was looking for was one of those allocated to be repainted.

Working slowly, desperate not to break anything, she finally managed to find the dish.

Probably because it hadn't been used in a long time, the dish was on the very highest shelf. It was just barely out of her reach, no matter how much she stretched her fingers.

Standing on her tippy toes, the best she could do was touch the rim of the plate. She couldn't find anything nearby to stand on either.

As she was at a loss about just what to do, someone suddenly reached out from behind her.

As someone brought the plate down from that shelf, she handed it to the girl, who accepted it gratefully.

"Here you are."

As the girl took the plate in her arms, she bowed her head deeply.

"Th... thank you very much."

"It was nothing."

"Fufu..." As she heard a small laugh, the girl finally raised her head to look.

Expecting to see a kind woman's face, the moment she beheld the person who helped her, the girl's breath stuck in her throat. She almost dropped the plate she had just been given.

"...Lady Camilla!?"



In front of her eyes was a young woman, with raven black hair that was an exceptionally rare sight in Mohnton. She was tall and slender, with a piercing gaze. It was impossible to mistake her for anyone else. She was the villainess of the love story that everyone still talked about, the marriage candidate of the mansion's master, Lord Alois. Camilla Storm, the future mistress of the house.

“I took the trouble to retrieve it for you, so I’d thank you not to drop it.”

As she said that with a prideful voice, Camilla stared at the girl. With a nod, satisfied that the girl understood, it seemed like her business was done. Turning away from the girl, she descended the steps to the kitchen on her own.

– Just like the rumours...

As the girl hugged the dish to her body, she stared blankly at Camilla as she left.

She had a sharp voice, a prickly attitude and such strong eyes... she really was intimidating. Prideful and willful, she was someone who would part the meek before her. Just looking at her, one felt like they would be struck down without any notice.

Back in the royal capital, she was an underhanded rogue who sought to throw down the Prince’s beloved Liselotte and ensnare the Prince himself. When it became known that she was to be exiled to Mohnton, everyone was afraid of what she might do next.

The same goes for those working in the Montchat estate. Every time Camilla did or said anything, sure enough, the gossip would spread between the house’s servants within the day.

Although, recently, there had been new rumours swirling around about her...

– Just like the rumours, she’s not as scary as in the stories.

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After leaving behind the maid girl she hadn’t seen before, it was back to business in the kitchen.

“I’ll have you teach me how to make sweets.”

“You don’t have the slightest clue about how to ask for sumthin’, do ya?”

At Camilla’s habitual irreverence for his domain, Günter, the lord of the kitchen, sighed. Not stopping his dinner preparations, he turned to look at Camilla.

However, Camilla’s attitude didn’t change. With her hands on her waist, she looked up confidently at Günter, who stood taller than her.

“Whether I beg and scrape or ask you properly, the result will be the same. In the first place, it’s not as if I’ll lose my head if you rebuff me.”

“Still just as pig-headed as ever, aren’t ya? Besides, didn’t you say that you wouldn’t make sweets before?”

“That was then, this is now. I have merely changed my mind.”

After all, as someone who wished to expand their cooking talents, she couldn’t limit her skills by completely ignoring cakes and confections. And if she thought about it rationally, having someone eat

something she knew would taste terrible would be unbecoming of her pride as a cook. Wouldn't it be better to raise up her skills, and surprise them with just how much she had improved?

Well, that was her reasoning.

“...If you were wanting to make sweets, Klaus would've been a better fit.”

“I would rather quit than be taught by him!”

Camilla immediately shook her head at Günter's suggestion.

“In the first place, he's a little too good. If there's such a difference in ability, it would be difficult for him to teach me. You should do just fine.”

“Whadd'ya...”

Günter's words trailed off as his hands began to move more vigorously than before. As his knife began to chop up vegetables with dreadful speed, he looked reproachfully at Camilla. He looked like he was spoiling for a fight.

“Oi, you. Have you forgotten I'm the head chef around here? Sure, I left the sweets to Klaus sometimes, but don't think I've gotten rusty or anything. I'll have you eat those words of yours!”

“If anyone is forgetting status around here, it's you! Besides, what kind of sweets can you even make with those boorish hands of yours!?”

“What did you say!? Alright, I'll show you good! Come over here, girl, these samples of mine will blow your mind!”

Günter beckoned Camilla over to another kitchen bench, where he pulled out all sorts of tools for baking and sweet making.

It seemed like the confectionary training would be just as tough as the rest of his instructions had been, but Camilla didn't shrink from the challenge.

She couldn't afford to let Alois eat something that tasted terrible, after all.

Rather late in the day, it was suddenly decided that the two of them would have a tea party, so here they were.

The afternoon was already bleeding into the evening, and it was almost time for dinner. As the red of the setting sun lit up the courtyard, Alois and Camilla sat across from each other at a round white table.

On the table, there was a veritable mountain of cakes and pastries made by Günter. There were miniature white cakes, topped with fresh cream. Raspberry tarts, their filling a vibrant shade of red. Savoury sized cherry pies and perfectly uniform cookies that resembled cobblestones.

They were different from the spur of the moment artisan creations of Klaus, the confectionaries that Günter made were all just like you'd see in the recipe book. The fact that none of them deviated from one another in either appearance or taste was proof of his skill.

But, as is always the case in this house, they didn't make their way to Alois' plate without being coated in sugar first. Not to mention that extra dollops of sweet cream were added, along with bastings of syrup, honey and saccharine jams. It was as if the original taste were buried under an avalanche of sugar.

– This tradition of theirs is utterly absurd.

She had seen how much effort Günter had poured into making these back in the kitchen, so it hurt her heart to see them bastardized like this.

“Is something wrong?”

Alois looked puzzled when he saw how bitter Camilla looked. There wasn't much energy in his expression when he called out to her as if he were exhausted. Was the work that piled up during their stay in Blume so overwhelming that it was even causing Alois problems? It wasn't unusual to see him spend all day in his office lately.

“...Nothing in particular.”

“I see...” Alois mused as she answered him, then took a bite of one of the tarts that were far too sweet for Camilla.

“It feels like it has been a while since I've eaten this much.”

Alois laughed as if he were slightly troubled by the huge stack of food in front of him, although taking another bite straight after.

It was definitely true that as of late, Alois' diet had begun to resemble what was normal for a man his age. They had also started to take regular walks together instead of taking morning or afternoon tea, with the number of sugary snacks he was eating being reduced as well.

What's more, ever since returning from Blume, Alois has apparently begun practicing riding again.

“Something like swinging a sword around is still a little too much for me,” he had said, which is why he chose to take horse riding back up. Even though he was so busy with work as of late, he still took

time where he could to practice his equestrian skills. That probably was part of the reason why he seems so tired.

She had seen him take the reins of a carriage before, so he must know how to handle horses. The main issue in the past was that there was no horse strong enough to carry Alois' weight. That, however, has changed.

– Somehow... I feel like it would suit him.

Not able or willing touch those violent sugary traps on the table, Camilla instead gazed at Alois, sipping her tea.

Alois, riding on horseback... she thought to herself that, perhaps, she might like to see that someday.

Camilla had arrived in the Duchy of Mohnton in the waning weeks of summer. That was already more than ten months ago.

Spring had already come into bloom. Alois' twenty-fourth birthday was drawing nearer by the day. After Alois' birthday, it wouldn't be too long until Camilla herself turned nineteen.

It felt like the one year anniversary of her being exiled to this place would come and go like the wind. Just how much weight had Alois lost in the better part of a year?

The amount of food he was eating had drastically reduced, and he began to take up different types of exercise on his own initiative. Because of the ointment and creams from Einst, his skin condition had begun to improve as well.

That being said, Alois was still quite a thick man, and his skin was still blemished. His true face still seemed somewhat hidden behind the remaining pockets of pockmarked and flabby skin. Although she can gather that what she could see of his face behind the imperfections was quite neat, it would be a long stretch to call him handsome with those leftover pimples and excess flesh.

– There's still some work left to do.

Camilla felt a little frustrated at being so close yet still not being across the finish line.

No longer truly desiring to return back to the capital with him, the original reason she had to turn him into a beautiful and handsome man worthy of envy had gone away. But, it was only human to feel like finishing what you've started, and she felt a responsibility to see this transformation through. Even though Alois himself seemed motivated now, Camilla couldn't afford to rest on her laurels.

And after Alois became a beautiful man... would she marry him? Or would she not?

...We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

As she waved away the thought that never seemed to leave her heart, Camilla watched Alois eat.

He ate like a proper gentleman, not wolfing down his food like before, though he didn't seem to have any complaints about the taste. He didn't spill any of the cream or smear the syrup across his hands as he ate in a way you could almost call graceful.

Morning, noon and evening. One thing about Alois hadn't changed. No matter how much sickly sweet or disgustingly fatty dishes were placed in front of him, Alois would polish them clean without fail. He ate those dishes with relish as if they were truly delicious, even though she knew that he had an excellent palate.

Taking meals like this was a historic tradition for the Montchat family. Inherited from the progenitors of their line. It wasn't something that Camilla, a stranger in this land, could so easily change.

– I know that. I know that, but...

Abundant salt and sugar were symbols of wealth. She understood the reasoning behind it; rich meals were their own signs of authority and power.

– But things that ought to change really should!

No matter what the justifications were, it was still desperately unhealthy for his body. Antiquated traditions shouldn't be treated like immutable dogma.

The only conclusion she could draw was that this tradition was the last obstacle in Alois' way to finally becoming thin.

“Second, change what kind of food is being served!”

Camilla suddenly slammed a fist on the table as she suddenly revived her old plan. Alois raised his face in surprise.

“What do you mean, all of a sudden?”

“This isn't sudden whatsoever, I've always thought this way. Even if it's a 'tradition', the amount of extra seasoning being added to your food is preposterous, Lord Alois! Surely you're aware of this!?”

Alois blinked in silence, without denying or agreeing with her words.

“Even if you cut down on your meals, there's no possibility of losing weight with such sweet and greasy foods! What's more, it's bad for your heart! Lord Alois, don't you think that this kind of food is ridiculous as well?”

“Camilla, stop...”

“I'm sure that you would rather eat food that truly tastes good as well, am I wrong? You have such an excellent palate as well-”

“Camilla.”

He spoke quietly, but Camilla's words still trailed off at that sound. Even if he hadn't raised his voice at her, there was a strange power in that voice that caused Camilla to inadvertently stop talking.

In front of her, Alois' looked stern. And considering how mild-mannered he usually was, that angry look in his eyes was off-putting. Camilla sat back in her chair, surprised herself by how she shrank back from the sight.

“...I'm sorry, I lost my temper.”

“No... it’s as you say, Camilla. I understand that this isn’t good for my body.”

Alois let out a deep sigh, then took a large bite of one of those miniature cakes.

“Tradition... tradition, huh? Indeed, it might be time to face it...”

“Lord Alois?”

Camilla raised her eyebrows at Alois, who spoke softly to himself. Hearing her, Alois turned back to look at Camilla, smiling softly as if to try and reassure her. Then, he suddenly looked up at the sky.

The fading sun of the afternoon had dipped below the horizon, and the sky was beginning to blur into darkness. A wind flowed between the partings of the cloud, swaying the trees in the courtyard. Even after winter’s demise, its chill winds remained, like the echo of a death rattle.

“It’s becoming windy now, huh? It’s about to get cold out here, shall we head back inside?”

“...Yes.”

Although she nodded obediently, she still looked at him suspiciously. He’s aware of what things really ought to taste like, and he knows just how bad it is for his body... Yet why did he end the conversation that could have lead to changing it?

– What is he hiding?

Despite Camilla’s distrustful scowl, Alois kept that regular smile of his. It felt like he and Camilla had become closer lately, but just as always he still held certain cards close to his chest. Just from the way he reacted emotionally, it seemed as if it was a sore spot for him as well.

– If you need someone to talk to about it, why not me?

Camilla studied Alois’ face, that seemed submerged in both equal parts fatigue and secrecy.

He said that he liked her, he had proposed engagement to her, yet still, it was as if he wouldn’t truly let Camilla into his heart. Whether in Einst or Blume, it was as if he always neglected to tell Camilla about the most important things. If only he laid it all out to her, that would clear up the misunderstandings between them. Camilla knew that he wasn’t hiding things from her out of malice, but she still couldn’t help but be bothered by it.

It’s not as if she wanted him to tell her every single thing. Camilla herself had things she didn’t want to say, after all.

But still, Camilla felt a deep sense of frustration at Alois’ attitude.

The incident in Blume was clearly Alois' fault.

The fact of the matter was that he had incited a riot, causing many people to be injured. It was also undeniable that Alois was inextricably linked to the debacle. The end result of his actions may have seen Lucas' crimes revealed, but that was simply that: a result. The ends did not justify Alois' means.

Deciding to hold a festival in Blume was also Alois' fault. The fact that, under Alois' guidance, the treasured traditions of Mohnton were intentionally torn down was a grievous fault. This wasn't the first time Alois had acted out in such a manner as well, taking into account the issue of Grenze. As a result of his new policies and developments in Grenze, especially in promoting trade with foreign countries, the town had become full of rogues and merchants of ill-repute, unbefitting the great land of Mohnton.

Not to mention, the disaster that took place in Einst the previous year. The massive damage done to the town had caused a major imbalance in Mohnton's economy.

That too was Alois' responsibility. If only he had responded to the crisis more expediently, a lot of the damage may have been avoided. The expenditures on reconstruction were also unnecessarily huge, it should have been possible to restore the town to working order on a much more modest budget.

That was the view of the three noble families that held sway over Mohnton.

Say what you will about those old men, but they were excellent sophists.

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It wasn't long after returning to the capital that he held meetings with the noble delegates of the Duchy of Mohnton, lead by the Meyerheim family.

Due to their extenuating circumstances, the Lörrieh family had excused themselves, so the only two families represented were the Meyerheim and Ende houses. Although he was used to remaining impassive as he received undue blame from others, either directly or through snide remarks, for once he couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of it.

Although one would expect that the representatives of the Lörrieh family would be the ones barracked for the debacle in Blume, due to their absence it was Alois instead who received the heapings of scorn.

Rather, it was probably a good thing that the Lörrieh family hadn't attended. They might not have been able to manage things quite as diplomatically when confronted like that.

Even a month after the end of those intense meetings, they still weighed on his mind.

This wasn't helped by the fact he was constantly receiving letters, complaining about one thing or another and either subtly or directly ascribing the blame to Alois. This wasn't anything new to him, either. Ever since Alois' reign as Duke had begun, they had always been trying to jostle him in such a way.

Such things didn't happen in the days when your predecessor was in charge.

That was their dog whistle.

The former Duke Montchat, Alois' father, died eight years ago. Yet despite that, memories of the previous Duke still remained fresh in their hearts, and Alois couldn't escape the constant comparisons.

If only the previous Duke hadn't passed away.

The ghost of his father seemed to haunt him still, his revenant shade kept alive in the hearts of those nobles who hated him so.

– Father...

With those thoughts pressing down on him, the pen between Alois' fingers came to a halt. Rubbing his temples, he breathed out a sigh.

He was troubled by how he and Camilla had parted after the tea party that evening, but this wasn't something Camilla needed to know about.

No, in fact, she would be better off not knowing.

There had been a new name on the tips of the tongues of those nobles, with which they so furiously lashed at Alois; Camilla.

Camilla has had a bad reputation in Mohnton, ever since she first arrived. Not to mention, the rumours that had spread about just what she had done in both Einst and Blume. They say that she's a disturber of the peace. Those old men are questioning whether or not her real intentions were truly something malicious after all.

"Can it not be said that Lady is having an bad influence on you?"

Just remembering those words made him feel depressed. As much as Alois wanted to call them out for their words, he didn't have the necessary power to go against them. The noble families held a strong influence over Mohnton, and with a lack of powerful allies, Alois could not defeat them alone.

What's more, Alois was very young compared to those experienced noblemen. In fact, after what had happened in Grenze, he had done a good job fending off the wolves as well as he had.

Alois had gained his own sort of experience through all this and had learned to roll with the punches, even sometimes avoid them entirely.

But, what about Camilla?

If Camilla accepted Alois' proposal, she would inevitably come under the same sort of fire that he did. What's more, she had a much shorter temper than he did. Perhaps she would try to take them head on and inevitably take a direct blow.

Alois had eventually come to find her passion quite endearing, but he hardly expected everyone else to think the same way. Certainly, her fiery attitude could very quickly leave a bad impression with those noblemen, and could also have a negative effect on the relationships he was trying to cultivate with the leaders of various towns in the region. As a result of that, it might even be possible for more ambitious traitors like Lucas to rear their heads again. Even if such a thing didn't happen, he could definitely foresee that the number of complaints heaped up against him would increase. Alois' power would be openly questioned, and even the common people's impression of him as a 'good lord' would change.

The only other alternative was Alois forcing Camilla to be someone she wasn't. And he would feel awful for pushing such a thing onto Camilla.

– Can she truly be happy, remaining in this land?

Alois asked himself that, staring down at his hands.

He didn't have an answer. If it was the case that she had nowhere else to go but here, then perhaps she wouldn't have any choice but to surmount those obstacles.

But, that wasn't the case now.

Alois took out the unsealed envelope from the drawer of his desk. Despite the simple design of the envelope, there was no mistaking the immaculate seal upon it. The seal of the royal family.

Inside the once sealed envelope was an invitation to the wedding of Prince Julian and Lady Liselotte, being held the next month. Then, in plain words at the bottom of the invitation, as if almost an afterthought;

“We also hereby grant amnesty to Camilla Storm, and rescind the aforementioned's exile from the Royal Capital as previously ordered by His Majesty.”

The letter had arrived two days prior.

But Alois still hadn't been able to bring himself to tell Camilla.

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An hour later, Alois heard the sound of a knock on the door of his study.

When he asked who it was, it was a senior maid who responded.

“I have brought your late night meal.”

As she said that, the maid brought food into the room on a trolley. Before Camilla had come to this land, such a thing had been a nightly occurrence. But, for the last few months, it hadn't happened at all.

“I don't remember asking for such a thing.”

Alois shook his head, motioning for the maid to leave. But, she did not. Boldly continuing to wheel the trolley, she brought it up beside Alois and placed the dish on his desk.

Alois furrowed his eyebrows in a glare.

“I do not want it.”

“That will not do. This is necessary for Lord Alois, after all. As Lord Alois seems to be unhealthily thin nowadays, I have taken it upon myself to serve the meals that the *master* deemed necessary.”

The ‘master’ the maid referred to was the previous Duke Montchat; Alois’ father. She was one of the senior servants who had been serving this house since before the previous head of the household had passed away.

“One dish after waking up, two dishes for breakfast, a dish at brunch, two dishes during lunch, and a serving of snacks for afternoon tea. After that, three dishes at dinner then another before bed. Master's

words left no room for doubt. In order to properly carry out his will, I must faithfully serve Lord Alois as such.”

Seven full meals a day. Thinking about it in light of his current diet, Alois’ father had set a ludicrous amount of food to be eaten. That was beyond doubt. Yet, the servants had faithfully followed their late Master’s orders, and Alois had also gone along with eating in such a way as if it were only natural.

But, that was in the past.

“Why now, so suddenl-”

As Alois’ eyes gazed at the dish in front of him, the words died on his tongue.

The late night meal, glistening in fat, had been served on a light blue plate, complete with an eye-catching decoration. It was ringed with intertwined colours of dark blue and gold. Alois’ expression changed drastically once he remembered exactly what that plate was.

“To think that I forgot one of the Master’s orders. Thankfully, one of the remarks of the head of the Meyerheim family helped me regain my memory.”

The maid who looked down at Alois as she spoke so deadly seriously wore her chestnut brown hair in a bun, the hair colour characteristic of the Meyerheim house.

“...This plate is...”

However, Alois didn’t hear her words at all. He couldn’t take his eyes off the dish in front of him.

“Just where did you get this... this plate...”

He was absolutely sure. This should have been hidden away in a room that Alois had expressly forbidden anyone from entering.

Of the three plates that had remained to him, one had already been shattered. The surviving two, no one should have known where they were. He had planned to keep them locked away, consigning them to the depths of his memories...

– Myboku...

“...Father’s plate.”

“I sincerely hope that you will follow Master’s instructions henceforth.”

As she lifted the hem of her skirt in a small curtsy, the senior maid left the room.

All that remained in the room was the exorbitantly seasoned dish and Alois who couldn’t tear his gaze off of it.

– Father...

Alois was all alone. There was nobody there to pressure him with their gaze. Yet, all the same, Alois’ shaking hand reached out towards the dish.

– I have to eat.

No matter the taste, no matter how much of it there was, he could not be permitted to not eat. As both a good lord, and a good son. The half-forgotten teachings that swam in his addled memories still had their hooks in Alois, tormenting him even now.

Death hadn't dispelled them.

If anything, death had only made them stronger.

Like a ghost.

The gift that Klaus had given her was gone.

The day after that tea party they had together, Camilla noticed that the white case she had been given before leaving Blume was missing from her bedroom.

She had treasured it as a precious gift, but... well, since it was technically a gift from a man, after all, she had hidden it on her shelf, in the shadows of some of her other possessions.

“Lady Camilla, is something wrong?”

As Camilla pored over the shelf in an attempt to locate it, Nicole who had just entered the room with fresh water asked curiously. After replacing the jug on her bedside table, she looked at Camilla.

“Nicole, there was a white case here, have you seen it? It was about this big.”

Camilla turned around and held out her thumb and forefinger to Nicole, making a gap between them that she could see the maid through. That said, Nicole was there when Camilla had placed it amongst the flowers, dolls and letters on the shelf to hide it.

However, Nicole shook her head.

“If you say so, it must be gone? Though when I was cleaning before, I don’t remember seeing it on the shelf.”

“Really? I wonder... did I just leave it somewhere?”

She usually kept it in her room, but sometimes she brought it to the kitchen with her. She had wanted to use its contents as a reference for making something like those candied flowers herself. The problem was that, in truth, they were so far beyond Camilla’s level of confectionary making that she couldn’t even use them as a reference point.

“Well, fine. I was thinking of going to the kitchen today at any rate. Perhaps I’ll find them there.”

Camilla had become Günter’s student when it came to the art of baking pastries and making sweets since she got back from Blume. Günter himself was strangely motivated, though that was hard to tell if it was because of some kind of rivalry with Klaus or because he was still frustrated with Camilla from before. But, at least, Camilla was learning. And occasionally, although they bickered, when they were at their most passionate they sometimes formed a surprisingly good partnership in the kitchen.

If she ended up being able to make delicious sweets, then she could eventually be confident enough in her ability that she could have Alois eat some as well. Camilla wouldn’t allow anyone to ruin her dishes, either. Whether that be with syrup, honey or whatever other saccharine weapons this household employed.

And, eventually, if Camilla could work her way into cooking most of his food, it would help Alois change his diet as well. But, first things first, she would have to finish her work when it came to sweets. Then, after that, she could change his diet piece by piece. Considering how straight to the point Camilla typically was, this was quite the long-term plan for her.

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“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Camilla stopped in her tracks despite herself when she heard the voice of someone she truly didn't want to hear.

As she was on her way to the kitchen, she heard someone's voice echo down the corridor of the Montchat mansion. As she stood straight against a wall and peeked her head around the corner gingerly, she saw Alois and Gerda facing one another.

It wasn't an unusual sight to see these two exchange words. Gerda was a senior employee who managed a lot of the employees in the house, after all. Even amongst the senior servants of the Montchat family, she was a veteran, and there was no one more acquainted with the inner workings of the house than her.

But, it was rare to see them so obviously confronting one another like this.

“You're saying you're unaware? Just who else, other than you, would take that plate?”

“That maid must have done it without seeking permission. I entrusted her with overseeing cleaning the house so it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect her to find such a thing as she worked.”

“Unreasonable both in finding it, and deciding to serve food on it to me?”

Even though Alois' voice was deep and angry, Gerda's expression was as icy as ever.

But despite the severity in his voice, Alois' expression remained calm, though firm. It was as if both of them were restraining themselves, at least compared to how Camilla would express her own displeasure. Yet, all the same, the electric atmosphere between the two of them seemed to almost be tangible in the air. A young maid that had been cleaning nearby escaped the scene as quickly as possible, a petrified look on her face.

“The senior maids aren't so courageous as to do something like that on their own. This was clearly something you insisted upon, Gerda.”

“How can you be so sure? That one, she had also started serving here during Master's tenure, after all. Considering the current crisis we now find ourselves in, is it so outlandish to think that she may take action on her own initiative?”

“Current crisis?”

“Yes.”

Gerda affirmed his suspicious words without skipping a beat.

It was as if she didn't care that the man in front of her was the master of the house or a Duke at all. She didn't feel cowed in her words at all. Somehow, it felt like even if Alois was the short-tempered kind of Lord and had tried to bark at her, she wouldn't have changed her attitude by even an inch, either.

“Even before abandoning the Master’s words, because of the uproar in Blume, the people of Mohnton are in a state of confusion. I am sure that maid was merely unable to bear the pain of seeing you in such a state, Lord Alois, as you destroyed the cherished traditions of this land one after another. And just what has influenced this? This recent change that you have been going through Lord Alois? Surely you’re aware of it yourself?”

Alois stayed silent as he glared at Gerda. Gerda may have asked the question, but both of them already knew the answer. Clearly, it was Camilla.

“The only thing that I can say is that perhaps in an effort to have Lord Alois remember who he truly is, she decided to serve you with that plate. Lord Alois, whether it be Mohnton or you yourself, neither need change. The most important thing is to maintain this perfect land, in order to honour the wishes of both Master and the generations before him. And above all else...”

As she said that, Gerda cast her gaze to the floor. For just a brief moment, a sad expression passed across her face. An expression Camilla had never seen her wear before.

“Above all else, this is what you owe to the two people that you murdered.”

“Gerda-”

But, just as Alois tried to speak, he was drowned out by the sudden shout from further down the hallway.

“What was that!?”

Camilla jumped out from around the corner, unable to hold back her words.

Gerda turned her gaze to look at Camilla, whilst Alois’ opened wide in surprise.

“What did you mean by that? What you just said...”

‘Murdered’, Gerda had definitely said that. From the way she said it, it didn’t sound like Alois sacrificing someone for the sake of the territory, or passing a death sentence as the Duke of the land.

No, she had said that Alois had murdered someone. Camilla couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

But, those eyes of Alois’ that stared at Camilla, the fright in them was unmistakable. As his face paled, Alois tried to speak out to her first.

“It’s nothing. Camilla, just now-”

“No, that won’t do, Lord Alois. Eventually, this person may one day be your wife. It would be remiss to keep secrets from her. You can’t hide it forever.”

“But, Gerda-”

“This person wants to hear the truth. You ought to be sincere with her, and tell her honestly.”

Camilla looked between Gerda and Alois. She typically hated the mere sight of Gerda, but for once, they were in agreement. Although she had been eavesdropping, she had heard everything leading up to

those words. She couldn't pretend as if she hadn't heard them now, and unless they talked about it, she knew the thoughts would weigh on her.

"Lord Alois, please tell me honestly. Was what Gerda said the truth?"

Alois bit his lip, staring at the ground. For a little while, only silence ruled. Despite it being spring, a chill breeze flowed down the hallway that was empty save for the three of them.

"If Lord Alois finds it difficult to speak about, then I shall tell you. Would that be fine?"

Gerda stared at Camilla as she said that, without raising an eyebrow. As for Camilla, so long as she heard the truth, it didn't matter.

She turned to nod at Gerda, but Alois suddenly shook his head.

"...No. I'll talk to you about it. Camilla, can I have some of your time?"

With that, Alois motioned towards Camilla.

The issue of the missing case had disappeared from her mind. After nodding at him without giving it a second thought, Camilla followed along after Alois.

Alois' parents passed away when he was fifteen.

That was only eight years ago.

Officially, the cause of death was an accident.

An accident caused by out of control magical energy.

○

“Camilla, you know that my magical power is stronger than that of most people, don't you?”

They were alone together in Alois' study. As they sat facing each other in front of the crackling fireplace, Camilla answered Alois.

“I know.”

Although she said that, Camilla hadn't ever seen the true extent of his magical power. The most she had seen him do was dispel Nicole's illusion, as well as strengthen his body with magic when they escaped the underground in Einst.

However, even if she hadn't seen it fully, the level of his power was obvious. Those vividly red eyes above all else told her more than she needed to know about just how much magical energy was stored within his body.

“I used to be unable to control the power I had in my body... no, even now, I still find it difficult to keep under control properly. But in the past, I truly couldn't wield it at all.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Most of my magical power is sealed away. Now, I can only use a fraction of the power in my body.”

Camilla raised her eyebrows. Even though Alois' power had apparently been curtailed, he could still follow the veins of the manastones underground. To do something like that would require strong magical power. To put it simply, Alois still possessed exceptional magical strength. And if he says that's just a 'fraction' of his real power, just what was he really capable of...?

“The sort of out of control magical energy that Nicole sometimes has trouble with, I also experience it. It's often just small things, though. Only once has my power truly gone out of control in a huge way. My magic came into contact with the magical power of other people, and ran amok.”

Alois sank back into his chair, gripping his hands into fists on his knees. Those downcast eyes of his seemed like they were solely focused on those clenched hands. Although his face was expressionless, the slight trembling in his hands betrayed his feelings.

“It was eight years ago. The day when my parents died, and the day that I killed people.”

A deep breath left Alois' lungs. As he curled his hands into even tighter fists, he looked at Camilla dispassionately.

"I barely have any memories of my childhood. Maybe that incident is what caused it? Whenever I try to remember anything that happened before it, it's like there's nothing there. I'm sure that's because a part of me desperately wanted to forget. Honestly, I can barely even remember my parents' faces."

Camilla listened with bated breath. Alois, meanwhile, was expressionless. As they sat in front of the fire, their figures cast dark shadows behind them. The way he spoke without emotion, it was as if he was talking about something that had nothing to do with him.

"But, I remember bits and pieces. The outlines of my mother and father, directing their magical power towards me... it was only afterward that I was told they were using their own power to seal mine. But, their magic was repulsed by my own and rebounded... they were torn apart by it, both of them. Mother and father."

It was then that a flicker of a frown ran across Alois' face. Then, it passed, and his mouth bent into a smile.

"I killed my parents."

"...But, that was just an accident? There was nothing you could have done."

"It was my own power that caused it. My power that took their lives. Even if I didn't mean to, it doesn't change the fact that I caused both of their deaths."

That was the reason why none of the senior servants referred to Alois as 'Master'. To them, Alois' father was still the Master of the house.

For stealing away the Master they loved and respected, they never forgave Alois. That attitude only made Alois fall deeper into guilt.

"But...!"

"The last vivid memory I have is when this power of mine tore through them. Because it was my power. The moment it came into contact with them, it was as if I touched them myself, and they died instantly. I still remember the feeling in my fingertips, as if I had ripped them apart with my own hands."

Alois' eyes narrowed as he looked back down at those clenched hands. That smile was still on his face, but it didn't have a shred of warmth. He was speaking about the past, but to him, it didn't feel like it. Even after eight years, it was still something he carried with him every day.

"Since then, my magic power remained sealed. I'm sure that the magic my mother and father died casting will stay with me forever. Even now, I can still feel their magic in my body. So that I won't ever be able to forget."

Although Camilla had tried to interject, to tell him that it wasn't his fault, Alois didn't care to listen. Even though it was only a tragic accident, Alois bore the guilt of a murderer.

As they sank into silence, Alois' expression didn't change. Sitting back further in his chair, he still stared at his hands, unmoving. Even though he was finally telling her something secret, instead of letting Camilla into his heart, it was as if he were putting up more walls around himself.

– He’s strong.

Camilla knew how she would react if she were in Alois’ position. If Camilla had to go through something like that, either she would drown in that guilt or try to justify herself, saying that ‘I didn’t do anything wrong’.

But, that gravely serious man didn’t allow himself those escapes. There was nothing I could do. It was an accident. I didn’t do anything wrong. He wouldn’t flee from what had happened by saying things like that.

He refused to be comforted, refused to be forgiven, and kept everyone else at arm’s length. He would carry that burden himself, and suffer under it alone.

‘Ah...’, Camilla thought to herself. ‘I understand now.’

– He is trying to atone.

That personality of his, that was so quick to martyr himself for the sake of others... this is where it came from. All he wanted to do was be a ‘good lord’, without desires or greed.

All of it, surely, was part of some kind of atonement to his mother and father.

– But, is that truly it?

There was something strange in the way that Alois had confessed.

Despite telling her this, somehow it felt like he was only pushing Camilla further away. There was still something in his heart that he didn’t want her to know about.

Just what weighed on his mind that was even more dreadful than this? Something he truly couldn’t tell anyone?

“Camilla.”

Camilla’s thoughts were broken when Alois spoke out to her. Leaning forward in his chair, Alois looked at Camilla’s face. Camilla was a little confused at his sudden change in attitude.

“Camilla, do you want to return to the royal capital?”

“...Excuse me? What are you talking about, so suddenly?”

Even though Camilla obviously had no idea what he meant, Alois didn’t pull back. He repeated the same question again.

“If you could return back home, would you want to?”

“What’s wrong? Besides, the royal capital is-”

“Please answer me.”

Even though Camilla tried to draw out the reason behind his question, Alois coercively pressed her for an answer. Camilla shrank back slightly, not used to how assertive he was being.

– Returning to the royal capital, that’s...

“It’s not as if I don’t want to go back.”

She had a lot of unfinished business in the capital. She no longer wanted to use Alois as a tool to sneer down at those who had scorned her, but she still couldn’t forget what Liselotte and the other nobles had done to her. She wanted to give her answer to Therese’s letters in person, and Camilla also had a few choice words for her parents. What’s more, she needed to find out the truth about whether they really had adopted Therese. She also wanted to see Diana, her maid, as well as the children she once cooked for at the city’s orphanage.

As for Prince Julian... she wanted to see him one last time, then she could give up on him without any regrets.

But, that was it.

“Things are different from before, though.”

“I see. So, you want to return. Of course, you would, right? I understand.”

Alois didn’t listen for the nuance in her words. Taking Camilla’s words purely at face value, he nodded as if he truly understood everything.

“Go back home, Camilla. It’s possible for you to return to the royal capital now.”

“Huh?”

“I received a letter from the royal court. Due to the occasion of Prince Julian’s marriage, your exile from the capital has been rescinded.”

“Wha...”

“For His Highness’ wedding, I’ll arrange for a carriage you can take back to the royal capital. From there, you are free to do as you want. You don’t need to return to Mohnton. You don’t need to respond to my proposal, either.”

————— Wha...?

“WHAT DID YOU SAAAAY!?”

Camilla bolted up from her chair, the scream tearing from her lips before she could even think.

– Back to the capital? My exile is over? He’s withdrawing his proposal? No, no, that’s not important right now!

She couldn’t keep her thoughts straight as they raged in her mind. Just where should she even begin? Although she stood up in a rage, she couldn’t find the words.

In front of her, Alois’ calm expression only conjured images of an impassive wall. Despite the thought of Camilla returning to the royal capital, despite telling her that he would withdraw his proposal, despite Camilla’s look of outrage, his expression remained like steel. She couldn’t figure out what he was thinking at all.

Camilla, on the other hand, could barely keep up with what was happening.

“B-but, what about our engagement? You told me to promise you an answer before you were twenty-four!”

“You don’t have to anymore.”

“And that’s fine with you? You don’t want to marry me anymore? Even though that was the reason you started to exercise!? To lose weight!?”

“I’m fine with it.”

Alois answered her bluntly. Just what about any of this was fine? Camilla didn’t know at all.

“Didn’t you love me!? You’re just giving that up!? Was that really all you thought about me!?”

“I do love you, my feelings haven’t changed. But, this is all for your sake.”

“For my sake!?”

As Camilla fumed angrily, Alois remained calm. Camilla couldn’t understand just how Alois could stay so cold, whilst also not knowing just where all this burning rage she was feeling was coming from.

But, she couldn’t help being angry with Alois, whose expression never cracked.

“I am a criminal. To be the wife of a criminal, in a land built for criminals, that’s not the sort of life you should lead.”

Trying to persuade her, Alois talked slowly.

“My power is dangerous, and it’s not something I can always control. Someday, you might get caught up in it.”

“And so, why should that change anything!?”

“I’m saying that I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t ever want to see you get hurt either. Even if you aren’t hurt by me, there are no shortage of people in this land that seek to do you harm.”

“Like I said, why does that change anything!?”

She didn’t care about anything like that. There were plenty of people who wanted to hurt her back in the royal capital as well. And even in Mohnton, there were more and more people who were coming to like Camilla as well. If Alois was worrying about something like that, it was as if he were treating her like something delicate. Something weak.

In the first place, Camilla barely had any magical power of her own. Clashing with Alois’ magic was impossible, wasn’t it?

“This isn’t just about me! Lord Alois, what is it that you truly want!? Is it that you just don’t want me around anymore!?”

“If you could live somewhere safe from harm, that would be enough for me.”

That’s why he wanted her to return to the royal capital.

The sad smile that finally came to Alois' face only angered Camilla even more. Without talking to anyone, without letting anyone past his defenses, once again he decided to sacrifice his own desires for the sake of someone else.

She thought that he had changed, but the true essence of this man really hadn't altered at all. It was as if she had only gotten through to him on a surface level, but people don't change so easily. At first glance, he seemed truly sincere. But in reality, it was just a front, like a mask of papier-mâché.

Camilla balled her fists. She had never felt an anger stir within her quite like this before. Although the blood in her head boiled, all she could feel in her chest was a cold emptiness.

Her lips trembled. Then, after taking a deep breath, her passion gave birth to her true thoughts.

“Don't play around with me! You... pathetic coward!!”

But, Camilla's scream didn't reach Alois, the way he was now.

Camilla was furious.

That was only natural. For ten days after that incident, Camilla and Alois barely said a word to one another.

Alois spent almost all of his time in his study, barely leaving at all. He didn't answer when she knocked on his door, and on the rare occasion they met in the corridor he excused himself with an 'I'm busy'. It would take a saint not to be angry about all this.

Had he shut himself off in there to think about what to do next? It was like he was at work constantly. All the food was delivered straight to him directly, it was like he didn't take his eyes off those documents for days at a time.

– He's running away from reality!

Feeling no end to her bitter irritation, Camilla slammed a fist into the cookie dough. No matter how much she took her anger out on the dough, though, it didn't seem to fade at all. Camilla had haunted the kitchens so much lately with a terrifying looking face that even those usually rowdy cooks didn't dare speak out to her.

Thanks to that, Camilla made more cookie dough than anyone knew what to do with. At first, she was making it to properly bake it into cookies, but she soon realized that the kneading process was much more suited to her mood, so instead the amount of dough just kept on increasing.

– At least hear what other people have to say! Stop running away from things! And this comfort eating of his absolutely has to stop!

Because she spent so much of her time in the kitchen, Camilla had picked up the gist of Alois' current food situation. Apparently, Alois had completely regained his appetite from before. No matter how many meals a day he was served, he was returning cleaned plates of that disgustingly overseasoned food. If this kept up, Camilla's efforts would be all for nought.

He had finally begun to really lose some weight and was even beginning to exercise, what's more, she felt like she had been on the verge of a breakthrough in regards to getting rid of all that excess seasoning in his food.

But now, Alois seems determined to not even face Camilla before she returns to the royal capital. It's as if he really does believe that this is what's best for her.

– Coward! Craven! He's scared, so that's why he's running away!

Alois wouldn't leave his room, she couldn't find that small case of flowers, and her progress when it came to making sweets was going off the rails as well. Nicole was beginning to scratch at her skin again like back when the miasma was thick in the air. Günter still didn't recognize Camilla's skill, and Gerda was as hateful as ever.

Everything felt like it was spiralling out of her control. And everything, all of it, was all Alois' fault.

“...Just as wild as ever.”

Stepping past the cooks who had slunk away in fear at the sight of Camilla pounding the cookie dough into a pulp, Günter looked at her without a trace of fright in his face.

“What else can I do!?”

As Camilla snapped back at him, Günter frowned. He didn’t yell at Camilla, who was making a mess of his kitchen, perhaps he even sympathized with her.

But, first and foremost, he was still Alois’ close friend.

“Well, I understand the young master’s feelings. Even just talking to you about it like that must have taken a lot of pluck.”

“Hmph,” Camilla breathed out angrily through her nose. That know-it-all Günter, he had always been aware of Alois’ dark past. ‘It’s an open secret around here,’ he had said. Apparently, all the veteran servants in the mansion knew about it.

Of course, no one spoke about it openly. It was only natural that Günter kept his silence about it as well, but even though she knew that deep down, she still hated it.

“Banding words about like that is cheap! Especially if you have no intention of ever talking to that person again in the first place!”

It’s easy to say whatever you please if you completely ignore what the other person has to say in response. You may as well be speaking to a brick wall.

“Even if you say that, he’s doing this for your sake, ain’t he? I’m sure that you have unfinished business back in the capital? Like... with Prince Julian, for example?”

“Enough about my sake! Does he really not care? Is Alois really going to give up on me that easily!?”

Günter’s frown deepened. To him, as far as he knew, Camilla hadn’t given up on Prince Julian. He still harboured a slight grudge against Camilla for what she had said back then, out of the deep respect he held for Alois.

“Not everyone thinks the same way as you do. Think about it from his angle, he really is doin’ this for you.”

“How can you say he’s doing this for me!?”

Camilla slammed a fist into the cookie dough.

“I... I don’t want him to give up! An Alois who’s running in fear from the past, who is so easily able to give up, I don’t want that at all!”

When she was in love with Prince Julian, Camilla had always dreamed about being his rock. Someone who could share his burdens. Someone who could support him by staying at his side.

But, it was as if Alois didn't want Camilla's support at all. He was scared, so he rejected her, pushing her away. Was Camilla truly a person he could open his heart to? He must have thought that. A weak man, who would rather run away than believe in Camilla.

That was unforgivable. But, even more than that, it was disappointing. She felt the anger flaring up even brighter as she thought about it. And also... it hurt.

"Lord Alois, was that really all I was to him...!?"

Camilla sighed angrily. She couldn't keep still, pacing short steps back and forth in front of the bench. As Camilla moved around restlessly, Günter looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"...Hey, you. The way you're talkin'..."

That suspicious look of his caught Camilla's eyes. Without feeling any pressure from Camilla's palpable anger, he looked straight into her eyes.

"It's like... no, I know that you're in love with Prince Julian and all, but even so... maybe..."

"What is it?"

Camilla felt irritated as he stumbled over his words. It was rare for Günter to not be straight forward like this. It was as if he really was suddenly intimidated by Camilla, and that's why he was hesitating.

But, after a shake of his head, he suddenly spoke up, more determined than before.

"Ah... No, I'll tell ya! Just, well, I'm not great with women, so I might be wrong about this."

As he scratched the back of his head awkwardly for a moment, Günter faced Camilla again.

This time, it was Camilla who suddenly felt a little overwhelmed by the strange pressure. With a deadly serious face, and a new found confidence in his voice, he finally said it clearly to Camilla.

"You, the way you're talkin'... it's as if you actually love Alois or somethin'!"

Camilla was speechless.

Those were the last words she ever expected to hear from that man's mouth.

For a while, it was all that Camilla could do to blink at him in sheer surprise. She combed over every syllable of the words she just heard in her head. She had completely stopped laying into the dough, and it felt like even her breathing had stopped. As she stared at Günter, his face began to look increasingly uncomfortable.

After a long time, the words she spoke had completely lost all the fire from before.

"...I'd never really thought about it like that."

She'd thought about being someone close to Alois. There was also the talk of engagement and marriage. What married life with Alois might look like, she couldn't really imagine it clearly still, but she had thought about it.

But, that... How strange.

– Do I love Lord Alois?

Could it have been because she had always been thinking about Prince Julian for such a long time? Or was it because of the awful first impression she held of Alois subconsciously blocking out the idea of ever possibly falling in love with him? Or, perhaps, was she afraid of the fact that she herself might have changed?

Yet, Camilla realized that she loved Alois.

That simple yet all-important fact had just never crossed Camilla's mind.

"I... I'm going to talk to Lord Alois one more time."

Holding her hands together, Camilla decided that. He might try to run away from her again. He might completely refuse to see her. But, she couldn't just do nothing, especially now.

"I will not let things end like this!"

She didn't truly understand her feelings herself. What Alois thought of her, and what she thought about Alois, Camilla had to make sure. If Alois was going to try and escape from her again, Camilla would have to pursue him harder than before.

– Because... how can I possibly return to the capital with things the way they are!?

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“Eat.”

As a mountainously piled dish on a blue plate was put in front of him, his father had said that.

Alois couldn't refuse.

That was because Alois was a good son. He was going to become a good lord. Doing this was necessary to become a good person.

If Alois couldn't achieve that, then what value did he have? Eat all that you are given, follow all the orders that you are told. Do not argue, do not talk back. Do not disappoint his expectations... and at the same time, do not exceed them.

Progress was unnecessary. But, degeneration too must be kept at bay. Just defend this land, and maintain its ways. Become another uniform cog in the machine that was Mohnton.

Even after his parents died, nothing had changed.

His father's will had lived on in the people around him, keeping their eyes on Alois. If he looked to be changing course, they would correct him. They would make sure that nothing would change. Make sure that the gear never malfunctioned.

“Eat.”

Or, perhaps this was all a delusion on Alois' part.

About his parents living on within his heart. That he had enormous guilt to bear. After meeting with Camilla, he felt like he was finally moving forward... was he giving up on all that?

Criminals should remain strangers to joy. The land of Mohnton, which shunned vice in favour of virtue, Alois was to make himself a reflection of it.

“Eat, Alois. You shall not be allowed to leave even a crumb. You are my son, this much should be simple.”

He thought that, if Camilla was there, he could change. That with her strength, he'd move on.

But, those thoughts of taking strides into the new unknown were smothered by those lingering memories of his parents.

Just a mere plate had turned him to stone, like a ruin entangled in the vines of the past. Just what would she think of a criminal like him? A coward like him? He truly feared how disappointed Camilla must be.

“That is fine.”

His father's memory said that. He was the only son of the Montchat family. The only one worthy to rule Mohnton. There is no escape for the criminal. To wallow in this dark and marshy land, doing the same jobs their ancestors began as an atonement, that was all those tainted with sin were permitted.

“Eat, Alois. For the sake of being a worthy son.”

– Father...

Dusk had come and gone, and his office had fallen into darkness. Alois sat at the desk, all alone.

Only a little while ago, that senior maid from before had come in, once more leaving a meal for him on that same blue plate. The voices he was hearing had only echoed from his own mind.

But, all the same, Alois couldn't deny them. On that blue plate his father had used, with the navy blue and gold decorations, there was a large serving of meat, soaked in oil and fat. There was so much of it that the food seemed to shine on the plate. The vegetables served on the side and the decorative white flowers seemed like they were drowning in the fatty oils dripping down the meat's flank.

– I have to eat.

Alois reached out to the heartburn-inducing dish. Stabbing into the meat with his fork, he brought it to his lips... and hesitated for just a moment, as he recalled where he had seen those flowers before.

In Blume, he had come across a hunched over Camilla in a field of flowers just like them. There was also the garland of white flowers that Camilla had worn like a crown as they danced together. Those pretty Sehnsucht flowers, they reminded him of Camilla.

Even though Alois was trying to avoid her, Camilla was constantly trying to reach him even now. Alois was sure that she'd be disgusted with just how timid and weak he was, but, just once more... Could they talk again, just one more time? Maybe if they talked, something really could change?

But, his thoughts faded once that fatty meat rolled onto his tongue.

“Urgh...”

It was so sweet. Covered in salt and saccharine honey. But somehow, there was also a sharp and bitter taste mixed in.

It was unlike anything else before. Shocked by the strange and vile taste that not even he could swallow down, Alois spat the food out. His mouth felt numb. Even though he spat it out straight away, he could even feel his fingertips growing numb.

– Someone...

He couldn't speak as his limbs rapidly lost strength. His consciousness began to fade. If no one came to help him now...

His vision was beginning to become hazy. Strong... the poison was so strong.

As his vision blurred even more, he saw those white flowers, decorating the dish. Mustering all of his willpower and the last ebbs of his strength, Alois reached out and grabbed those flowers instinctually, as the dish smashed to the floor.

The thudding sound echoed through the quiet of the mansion's night.

The last thing Alois remembered before the darkness overcame him was the sound of the door flying open, and someone's footsteps rushing towards him.

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She had already been pursuing Alois more aggressively for a few days now.

However, despite him continuing to try and escape her, when they finally met, it was in a way Camilla couldn't have predicted.

"Lord Alois! A-are you alright!?"

Even though it was still late at night, Camilla had rushed into his room with a loudly raised voice.

There was one large bed in the room and only a single shelf for books, as well as a fireplace, and two chairs. Other than that, Alois' room seemed devoid of possessions. Even though she had visited his room many times in the past, she could never get over just how plain and empty it really was.

And on that bed, Alois was lying down. A court physician was assessing him on one side, whilst the rest of the bed was surrounded by servants. There was Vilmer, the long-serving chamberlain and Gerda, the head of all the maids. Besides them, there was also the head butler and the senior most maid directly under Gerda. Those four made up the most veteran servants in the household, whilst a large number of their subordinates stood silently behind them.

As Camilla burst into the room in a flurry, they turned to glance at her. Then, without any more reaction to her entrance, they turned back to look at Alois. She felt a little uncomfortable with their uniform movement, as if they were all tied together with string, but that wasn't important right now.

Camilla pushed her way through the ranks of servants to reach the bed. A few moments later, Nicole finally caught up to Camilla and entered the room, out of breath. Realizing the heavy atmosphere, she felt a shudder run up her spine and she tried to make herself scarce at the fringes of the room, but no one paid her any mind.

"Poison... is it true that you were poisoned!? Are you truly alright!?"

"I'm fine. Camilla, I'm sorry, for making you worry like this."

Alois was awake, lying slightly propped up in his bed. He was wearing white clothes as if he had been brought to a hospital back in the royal capital. His voice didn't tremble, but the colour had been drained from his face and his eyes looked haggard. It was a hard sight to bear.

"It really isn't anything worth worrying about, though. I barely swallowed any of it. The doctor told me to rest just in case."

"How is this not something to worry about!?"

"It's nothing to get into an uproar about. As you can see, I'm alright."

"Lord Alois!?"

She wanted to say more, but Alois shook his head. Camilla could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Alois was the lord of this land. What's more, a Duke with royal blood. And such a man, someone had tried to poison him. How could a matter like that be dropped simply because he was still alive?

Somebody had undoubtedly tried to murder Alois. They had aimed for his life. This was absolutely something to get into an uproar about.

And it didn't seem as if Camilla was alone in that way of thinking.

"That will not do, Lord Alois."

It was Gerda who spoke next. She stood a little away from the bed, but she emerged from the shadows of the other servants to step forward and speak.

"We must find the culprit who poisoned you. An investigation should be conducted, and the poisoner identified as soon as possible."

"That's not needed. I don't consider this to be a serious matter. I am telling you now, I am ending it with this. Also, no one shall speak of this outside of the mansion. Make sure everyone else is aware of that."

As Alois stubbornly retorted, Gerda's eyes subtly narrowed by a hair. As the two of them obstinately looked at one another, no one in the room said a word. Despite the room being full of so many people, you could barely hear anyone breathe.

"We only want to look for the person who endangered your life, Lord Alois. Why are you so insistent on stopping us?"

The first one to speak was Gerda.

But, despite Gerda's question making sense, Alois didn't respond. That impassive face of his simply continued to stare at her.

"...Are you thinking of shielding someone? Do you have an idea of who the culprit may be?"

Alois still remained silent. All he did was breathe and blink. If it weren't for that, one might think he truly had died.

"So there truly is someone to protect? So be it... Look for the source of the poison. First, speak to the maids who prepared and served the meal."

"Yes."

At Gerda's command, her second-in-command maid nodded with a stern expression. Then, she left the room, with several other servants trailing behind her. Although Alois had expressly forbidden it, she had instead chosen to obey Gerda's words.

"Gerda."

Alois glared as she called her name. But despite that steely tone of voice, Gerda wasn't intimidated.

"If we simply leave the culprit be, then your life will still be in danger, Lord Alois. To find the poisoner, we shall use any and all means. Lord Alois, you may rest in the meantime."

Cupping both her hands in front of her, Gerda stretched out her back as she spoke.

“You needn’t concern yourself with this matter anymore. All that you need to do is follow Master’s orders. Nothing need change.”

Then, she bowed. Despite clearly disobeying, she kept the etiquette of a good servant.

“‘Eat. You shall not be allowed to leave even a crumb.’ We shall have your late night meal brought to your room, so make sure to heed the words of the Master without fail.”

Camilla blinked in surprise at Gerda’s words. Alois, meanwhile, seemed to grow even paler. That expression of steel from just a moment ago collapsed in an instant, as his lips trembled.

“...With that, I shall take my leave.”

But, Gerda turned on her heels and left, not paying any notice to Alois’ state. The rest of the servants followed in her footsteps.

The only people left were Alois and the doctor, as well as the stunned looking Nicole. Of course, Camilla stayed as well.

In that room that suddenly seemed much more cavernous than before, Camilla spoke first.

“...Late night meal?”

Even though Alois laid there, still recovering from poison, that was the first thing she could say. Camilla wasn’t a bad person, but she often had a habit of being insensitive.

What’s more, she was still surprised by what had just been said to Alois.

Despite looking like the prim and proper servant, Gerda had never truly acted like she took Alois’ words as gospel, but this went far further than ever before.

– Well, I too think it’s important to find whoever the culprit is...

Despite how she went about saying it, Camilla found herself agreeing in principle with Gerda. In fact, the person she had doubts about now was Alois, who really was acting as if he was trying to protect someone, despite being the one who was poisoned. If they didn’t catch the culprit now, the same thing might happen again.

– But, why didn’t he say anything...!?

Camilla thought to herself bitterly. Even if they were the senior most servants in the mansion, even if they were the ones who organized all the other employees, even if they really did have an intimidating air about them... it was unthinkable that he be cowed like that merely by words.

“Lord Alois! Don’t eat before going to sleep!”

“I have to eat.”

“...Excuse me!?”

As Alois muttered weakly, Camilla wondered if she was hearing things. Staring at Alois in utter disbelief, she noticed that he was trembling.

“I’m not allowed to leave any food, so why did I spit it back out...? Why did I vomit...?”

“Lord Alois...?”

Alois hugged himself with his arms, his eyes turning down to the ground. It was as if he couldn't hear Camilla's voice anymore.

“Why couldn't I swallow it...?”

And as he tightly wrapped his arms around himself, power began to flow from Alois. Camilla instinctively flinched backwards. She could feel something faint, shimmering against her skin. Behind her, she could hear Nicole let out a frightened gasp.

She remembered this feeling.

– It's like in Einst...

That strong magical power continued to grow, turning Camilla's skin numb from the energy. As Alois' thinking became more and more unstable, the magical energy in his body began to grow unchecked, running dangerously throughout the room.

“I have to eat... I have to eat more, to make up for everything I vomited...”

Not seeing Camilla shudder at the awful sensation of the magical energy crawling over her skin, Alois stood up out of bed. The doctor was trembling so much that he didn't even think to stop him. Neither Camilla nor Nicole could say a word, either.

As Alois staggered on unsteady legs, he began to make his way towards the door. As he opened the door and left, it was only after it closed behind him that Camilla could breathe again. She could feel that the rampant magical energy in the room was slowly beginning to fade.

“...ah... Lord Alois! He's gone!”

As Camilla regained her senses and tried to run after him, someone tugged back on her arm. When she turned around, she saw Nicole's petrified face. As she held onto Camilla's arm for dear life, she looked up at her with tears in her eyes.

“You can't! It would be bad if Lord Alois got even more upset! There might be an explosion!”

Other than him, Nicole was the person with the strongest magical power in the mansion. She would have a much better idea about the true danger of Alois' magic raging out of control than Camilla.

“There's nothing we can do now! He has to calm down by himself!!”

“Nicole...”

Camilla stood still, as Nicole looked at her more determined than she had ever seen her.

The desperation in her voice wasn't just a warning about some vague danger. She was truly worried about Camilla's safety.

“I'm sorry. But, I cannot just leave Lord Alois like that.”

The Alois that Camilla knew was always calm. It was rare to see him moved by passion, whether that by joy, anger or sorrow. But now, that man was whipping himself so harshly that he had begun to tremble violently, causing his magical energy to lash out of control.

There was probably no one who could approach Alois now. Perhaps, by tomorrow, he would have calmed down. He might even be able to wear his mask, like usual.

But, what about today's Alois? He would suffer alone and in torment, with no one by his side until the sun rose. Such a thing like that was too painful to think about.

"I am just going to check on him. I'll be back soon."

And with a proud laugh and a bold smile, Camilla ran a gentle hand through Nicole's hair, trying to reassure her.

Then, despite how uneasy Nicole still looked, Camilla opened the door and left that room.

Now, where had Alois gone?

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She found Alois in the old storeroom, next to his own bedroom.

It was a room that he didn't want to let anyone enter, a room where Nicole snuck in one day and broke an important plate. Just why on earth did he come here of all places to eat? In front of that family portrait, its frame covered in dust, Alois sat alone at a table as he ate something, his back turned to Camilla.

As soon as she had stepped into the room, she had felt a crawling sensation on her skin. The room was so full of rampant magical energy that even Camilla, someone who had next to no magical power herself, knew just how powerful it was.

Even though she hesitated for a brief moment, Camilla eventually steeled herself and marched into the room.

"Lord Alois!"

"I'm sorry, but please leave me alone for now."

However, as if to curtail Camilla who had plucked up her courage to face him, Alois wouldn't even turn to face her.

"I'll be fine. Just for today, please leave me alone."

Camilla frowned as he tried to push her away with his words once again. This man, is he always going to be so set on building walls around himself?

"There's nothing you can do for me, Camilla. Please, for today, just go back to your room."

"As if I could do such a thing!?"

Ignoring Alois' words, Camilla kept striding boldly into the room. The only things that could be heard for a brief moment were Camilla's footsteps, as well as the quiet and restrained sounds of Alois eating. He eats and eats, even if he shouldn't.

"Lord Alois, just what on earth are you eating!?"

She bellowed that out as she walked over to him,

"...Iboku wonder, just what have I been eating all this time?"

"Lord Alois?"

"The food I eat, just what is it meant to be?"

From where she stood, Camilla could only see Alois' back. The portrait of the former Duke and Duchess hanging above Alois seemed to cast a shadow down on the table.

"Taste doesn't matter. I can't think about whether it's good or bad. The only thing I'm allowed to do is chew and swallow. There could have been poison mixed into my food for years and I wouldn't have known. Or, perhaps, I've just become accustomed to enjoying poison?"

“Lord Alois!”

“I knew that something like this would happen sooner or later. Neither father, nor mother, nor anyone would allow me to change. Things such as meeting new people or trying to move forward, I knew they were forbidden, the only thing I’m allowed to do is protect this land, as it was. Someone like me, who disregards his father’s will like this, has no value at all in the eyes of his servants.”

“Do you even hear what you’re saying!?”

She could barely understand the words that Alois muttered under his breath. But, even though Camilla raised her voice at him, he still kept talking.

“This dish is my repentance, my parent’s will, and also... their insurance. Just why am I still alive? I don’t understand...”

Something in the room began to stir... was it dust? The magical energy in the room popped and crackled viciously. As he kept speaking, Alois’ voice began to waver as well.

“Just why couldn’t I swallow it? Just why did I spit it out? And even vomit? Father and mother would never permit me to do something like that... But, when I saw that flower, for some reason I thought that I didn’t want to die...”

“*Lord Alois!*”

Words were meaningless now. Standing behind Alois, Camilla grabbed his shoulders as firmly as she could.

Alois, who had been eating elegantly with his knife and fork even now, finally set them down. She didn’t hear them drop to the table. She also did her best to ignore the burning pain from the magical energy that ran through her hands as she touched Alois.

“Please get a hold of yourself this instant, Lord Alois!”

“I do have a hold of myself, Camilla. I always do.”

Alois turned around to look at her, the turn throwing off one of her hands as if the force Camilla was using to grasp his shoulders was nothing.

“I always did my best to be a good son. And I was, until I met you.”

He ate all the dishes served to him just like his parents wanted and he gained weight just as his parents expected. He ate dish after dish that could have contained any amount of poison, and he was ready to die any time.

Alois never complained, and always strived to meet other’s expectations. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to die. But, instead, because he wanted to be a ‘good son’ for his parents.

And yet...

“But, father won’t forgive me now. Mother won’t look my way either. The person who poisoned me was acting as my father’s hand. That means I’ve been a bad boy, Camilla...”

Alois looked up at Camilla. His face was completely different from that usual subdued expression he wore.

He was grimacing sadly, his eyes puffy and red.

He looked delicate and vulnerable like he would break at a single push. That face of his that looked on the verge of tears... it was a young boy's face.

"Father and mother, they're always watching. They know what I did to them. They know that I should have died instead of them... they know that with my own hands, I killed them myself!"

Alois suddenly grasped at Camilla's arm that still held his shoulder. He looked utterly desperate as he grabbed her slender arm with both of his hands.

"I have to be a good lord! A good son! Otherwise, the only thing I can do is die! I can still feel them cursing me, even now!"

His magical power began to swirl visibly around him. One of the old vases in the room shattered, smashed to pieces by a violent lashing of magical energy. But Camilla kept staring straight at Alois, ignoring the distant sound.

– He really is too much of a good boy.

Camilla recalled the impression that she'd had of Alois time and time again as she grew to know him.

Rather than a good man, or even a good person, he reminded her of a 'good boy'. And now, she knew the reason.

Alois was still a child. He was still merely a boy who remained bound to his parent's will, not allowed to spread his wings at all. He was still afraid of his father and mother and did everything to keep in their good graces, without doing anything for himself. It was as if for this child, who didn't know how to be selfish, time itself had stopped.

That was the true nature of the man known as Alois Montchat. The truth that was buried in his heart, beyond his meek appearance. Fragile and vulnerable, that's why he kept everyone at arm's length, for fear that what little he had would break at the slightest of touches.

Perhaps Alois too was aware of just how twisted it was.

He must have always been a clever child, even back when he truly was a child. That cleverness was why he hadn't failed. That cleverness too was why he took that burden onto himself because he deluded himself into thinking that he both could and should.

"I wanted to change."

Alois still gripped Camilla's arm as he looked up at her.

"I was scared of change, but, I thought that if you were with me, I really could. But, this is too much. I'm scared. I'm scared, I don't want to be betrayed again!"

"...Betrayed?"

“I can’t ever be free of my father and mother. I can always feel them there... All I see are bits and pieces of memories, and most of them are bitter, but sometimes I see my mother’s smile... If the only memories I had were painful, then this wouldn’t be so hard, but those glimpses I see are... They might have actually loved me, once!”

When his parents had died, Alois had inadvertently felt an unmistakable sense of relief. But, that sense of relief in of itself had festered into a burden of tormented guilt. Those vague and fleeting memories of a gentle mother’s smile, whose face he couldn’t even remember anymore, were like poison to Alois. Just how could he conflate his mother’s smile with a person he knew he was relieved to have seen died?

Every time Alois had hoped, those hopes had been betrayed. But still, he had kept hoping. Like an infant, waiting for their mother.

“Just what are these memories? I’m sure that my parents never loved me... Then, just why do I have them? Where do these memories come from?”

Alois wallowed in blind confusion at those fragmented memories. In that sense too, he couldn’t move forward. Like a lost child, wandering alone through the dark swamp, as the mud slowly mired around his legs.

“...Please help me.”

Alois muttered so softly that it was almost a whisper. As Alois’ emotions began to twist in fear, the magic in the air shimmered and swayed. He was trembling. The strong grip he had of Camilla’s arm before had become weak.

“You have to help me, Camilla. Please, please help me...”

Like a child clinging to his parent, Alois whimpered. Tears finally began to form in the eyes of that child, who had held them back all this time. They began to pool in those red eyes, slipping slowly down his cheeks.

“I want to change. I don’t want to be scared of mother and father anymore...”

The tears streamed down to his chin now. Then, suddenly, he began to grip Camilla’s arm strongly. It hurt.

“I have to get out of here. I want to leave it behind. That’s all I want, but... I’m not strong enough...!”

Alois’ desire to change wasn’t something that was permitted either by his parents or the people of this land. Even if they poisoned him, he had to remain the same. If he changed, he would die.

But, even so, he couldn’t help himself. Alois truly wanted to change. He wanted the power to overcome that fear.

“Camilla, please, you have to take me away from here. I can’t be here anymore, so-”

‘Please’, the word never came out of his mouth, swallowed up by the sudden dry sound that echoed through the room as something hard struck against his cheek.

Alois slowly took his hands off Camilla and held his cheek. Just what was that pain? His skin was starting to redden.

“I am not your mother.”

As much as Alois’ cheek ached, so did Camilla’s hand sting.

That was the first time she had ever struck anyone in anger, and she didn’t expect her palm to hurt quite so much.

Was it due to the pain? Or simply the shock? Either way, the swirling magical energy became even more violent than before.

The dish on the table broke apart with a bang. Even though the jagged pieces cut at her skin as they flew, Camilla didn’t stop.

“I’m not going to coddle you. And I can’t simply save you, either. Lord Alois, just how old are you now?”

Alois stared silently at Camilla. He looked like a child who had been struck by his own mother.

“You’ll be twenty-four soon. What’s more, it has been nearly nine years since your parents passed. You’re a fine adult. Who even has the right to tear you down?”

In place of a voice, the magic that surrounded Alois expressed his emotion. Raging out of control, it knocked ornaments and books off the shelves and even left cuts on Camilla’s skin. Constantly cracking and snapping through the air, the sound of the rampaging magic was constant.

It looked like even Alois was frightened by the maelstrom now. Perhaps, it may have reminded him of the time that his parents died.

“Nobody has the right to tear you down if you really want to change. But, I can’t just praise you or comfort you because you ask for it. There’s no use expecting something like that from me. I’m not your mother, and I don’t want to be your mother either.”

“...Camilla.”

“Suffering is something you have to deal with yourself, and you have to save yourself with your own two hands as well. You also have to know your own limits. You have to make a decision by yourself if things have gone too far. Because that’s what an adult does!”

“But, I...”

“If you want change, start with changing yourself. You want to lose weight!? Then limit the amount of food you’re eating by yourself! Exercise as well is something you have to do because you want to do it as well. You’re not a child anymore!”

As she said that, Camilla clapped Alois’ cheeks between her hands. Then, she smooshed and stretched out his face with her fingers. Because she felt like if she let go now, he wouldn’t keep his eyes on her.

“I’m not going to coddle you and I’m not just going to just tell you what you want to hear! Sometimes, I might even say the things you’d rather not hear at all! But, if you ever want someone to talk to, then I don’t mind listening! Don’t just keep it all to yourself, like there isn’t anyone around you who cares!”

Even if it wasn’t Camilla, Günter or Klaus would always hear Alois out if he needed someone to talk to. If there was a problem, they could put their heads together to find a solution.

Despite that, Alois always refused when people held their hands out towards him. His fear, his guilt from the past, and his parents’ binding words, Alois used these to keep people away.

But, if he truly stopped to look, he would understand. Alois’ parents weren’t here any more. Instead, there were all sorts of people who would look his way instead. People who trusted Alois, because he had earned that trust.

“Camilla...”

Alois suddenly extended a hand towards Camilla again. As he did, the tears began to well up in his eyes again. He tried to keep them back, but they hopelessly spilt over all the same. But, he took a deep breath, swallowing down the sob in his throat.

“I want to change.”

Alois bit his lip, then kept talking, his voice tired and soft.

“I can’t let things stay the way they are. I want to change. I want to change, Camilla.”

Alois’ arm looped behind Camilla’s back, holding her tightly. She didn’t realize that Alois had pulled her into a hug before it was too late.

“W-what are you...”

Even if her eyes suddenly opened wide in surprise, and she tried to escape him, Alois didn’t let her go. Alois’s tear-streaked face was so close.

Nine years... Or, perhaps, even longer than that. These were the tears that Alois had kept inside all that time.

“Camilla...”

Alois shut his eyes tight. She could see the tears glistening on those silver eyelashes. Camilla couldn’t say a word, as she was transfixed by him, who only wept in silence now.

She kept watching him without saying anything. She forgot his sudden hug and just kept staring at him.

Those tears that changed a boy into a man subtly caught the light of the single lit candlestick in the room. The flickering reflections that ran down his cheek looked like they had been caught alight.

“Camilla, please stay by my side. Please, don’t go back to the capital. There are all sorts of dangers around me. And this land itself isn’t safe. There are so many things that might hurt you. But...”

Alois’ voice was faint, but his words were clear.

“I want you to stay here, by my side. I want to change, with you at my side...!”

The magical power in the room had converged back on its master before she knew it.

All that it left in its wake were the ruined antiques that the room stored.

Behind Alois, she heard something tall topple over.

But, the only thing Camilla noticed was the power in the arms that held her.

“I’m sorry you had to see something like that...”

After finally calming down somewhat, Alois said that embarrassedly.

“I showed you a really shameful side of myself.”

Alois finally freed Camilla from his hug as he said that. Camilla finally took a deep relieved breath, as if she hadn’t breathed at all as Alois held her so tightly.

Contrary to those rumours about her being a loose and vile woman, Camilla had never been touched by a man like that before, except for her father and uncle. That was only natural since, for a long time, Camilla had only ever had eyes for Prince Julian.

Thanks to that, she’d never experienced anything like that before. It was a strange feeling.

“No, not at all. Well, in the first place, I did something not too dissimilar only a while ago...”

As she took a step back from Alois, Camilla said that. Back at the flower garden in Blume, Alois and Camilla’s positions had been wholly reversed.

At that time, it had been Alois who had listened to Camilla. Therefore, it was only right that Camilla listens to him now.

Noticing Camilla had put just a little bit of distance between them, Alois smiled wryly. After wiping away the tears, his face looked strangely bright, like a weight really had been lifted off of him.

Then, Alois suddenly looked as if he remembered something. Turning away from Camilla, he looked back bitterly at the family portrait that had been hanging above the table.

“...I’m sure my parents would think of me as a wretch now.”

That faded family portrait... Alois’ magical power had torn straight through it, leaving a massive scar, though it still stayed in one piece. With such a gaping wound running right through the painting, it would definitely be a difficult thing to restore.

Or rather, maybe the way the portrait was now reflected his true feelings perfectly.

“Maybe I was a bastard? Or honestly, maybe I’m not really the son of either of them? I’ve always wondered about that.”

The Duke Montchat in the painting was abnormally slim and almost hauntingly pale. Because of the constant practice of incestuous marriage in the noble houses of Mohnton, his body was supposedly weak as well. The only way Alois resembled that gaunt man was his hair colour.

His wife looked like a fragile but kindly woman. She had a certain elegant air about her. That gentle atmosphere seemed similar to Alois, but an atmosphere is not something passed on through blood.

“I suppose that’s part of why I was so desperate for them to recognize me. And after they died, all the more so. That sense of guilt must have played a part as well. It really was childish, looking back. It really was like I was a young boy, who just wanted his parents to praise him.”

Camilla had heard about Alois' family before. When he spoke about his parents, what little he could remember weren't gentle memories, as he told them. But, still desperate for that affection, he had set aside this room to hang up their portrait and keep all sorts of mementos to their memories.

Yet, this shrine to the past had been torn apart by Alois' magical power.

"But, father and mother are long gone, now. The only one binding me is myself. That magical power of mine, I suppose it was my own feelings that really kept it sealed away as well? How do they say it, you make the bed you lie in?"

Alois shook his head softly. Then, he suddenly turned to look at Camilla, his face slightly more serious looking as he frowned.

"I'm sorry, Camilla. You got hurt because of me."

"Something like this doesn't hurt at all."

With a derisive sniff, Camilla turned up her nose as she brushed some of the dust off her arms. But, Alois didn't look relieved.

"...I'm still worried. What if I hurt you again like this, someday? Whether it's my magical power, this land, or even this mansion... this isn't a safe place. I'm sure this won't be the last time you'll face danger, if you stay."

"So, after all that, you're going to tell me to go home again?"

As Camilla glared at him, Alois began to stammer, his tongue tripping over itself. As he kept hemming and hawing, Camilla grew more and more impatient.

"Ahhh! Jeez!"

Alois didn't manage to get his words out straight before Camilla lost her patience. Stamping her heel into the floor, Camilla stepped forward. Then, walking straight up to the surprised looking Alois, she raised her voice.

"Then, I'll show you! My magic charm!"

"...I'm sorry?"

"It's a magic that breaks curses. A secret spell, that I can only use once. With this, I'll break that cursed past of yours, Lord Alois, so you don't have to concern yourself with it anymore!"

As she said that, Camilla thrust her finger towards Alois' chest.

And, on that fingertip, Camilla concentrated all her scarce amount of magical power. There was so little magical energy it could even be questioned as to whether this was magic at all. If anything, it didn't seem like anything more than a child's good luck charm.

But, there was something special about it. The fact that Camilla showed this to someone was special in of itself.

The magic that Camilla was casting was one that dispelled curses. It was similar to the spell that Alois used on Nicole all those months ago, but just far less complex or powerful.

There wasn't any feeling of magic in the air, no mystical sounds or fantastic lights either, as all the magic she gathered quietly seeped into Alois, disappearing forever from her body.

"Just what is this..."

Alois blinked in surprise as he pressed a hand against his chest.

Then, he looked at Camilla's still extended fingertip. As expected of a man who was so adept in magic, it didn't take him long to notice.

"That's a royal sorcery, isn't it? Just how did you do that, Camilla?"

That's right. There are a number of ways to dispel magic, but those methods vary wildly between casters. Some spells are widely known amongst all those who study magic, whilst others are only passed down through fraternization and bloodline, secrets jealously guarded against outsiders.

The sorceries of the royal family were no exception. The method of channelling magic as well as the symbols to be drawn in order to bring it forth, these were things kept unique to the royal family, and weren't something that could simply be imitated by watching.

"I was taught how to do it, when I was still a girl."

Alois didn't bother to ask 'who?'.

"It was Prince Julian, then?"

"Yes. His Highness showed me this magic himself first. When I first met him, he looked like a common boy, but it was only after His Highness cast that magic to dispel his own mother's sorcery did I see his red eyes and silver hair. That was the first time I truly saw His Highness."

The dispelling itself wasn't the only surprise. Although the boy who he had been disguised as through magic was certainly very handsome, his true figure far eclipsed that beauty. Although the magic in his eyes was definitely a concern, Camilla came to realize herself that part of the reason the Prince's mother disguised his son was that his breathtaking appearance was truly mesmerizing as well.

But, for Camilla, although his real appearance was a surprise, it hadn't changed much. She had been charmed by him the moment he had told her through his tears that her cookies were delicious.

"*'No matter what I look like, I want you to know that it's me'*, His Highness had said, and then taught me that magic. But, I kept that magic secret, just for His Highness. Honestly, it really is a secret charm."

"Even though it's so secret, you used it... on me?"

"Right. I used it on you, Lord Alois. With that, now you know all my secrets. I've told you everything that I held dear about Prince Julian. So... how was it, my magic?"

Alois smiled at Camilla's words. Camilla's magic hadn't just been for the sake of trying to dispel his curse. When she said that she would 'show him', she also meant her past as well.

That magic wasn't just for Alois' sake either. Camilla, too, was trying to unbind herself from the curses of the past with that magic spell. Her memories of the capital, as well as the regrets she left behind. By using that spell she could only ever use once, Camilla cast away the past that had clung to her for so long.

"Thank you. I'llboku... Rather, I shallwatashi do my best to live up to that, then?"

Realizing the meaning behind it, Alois smiled at her.

"It's not 'I want to change', but 'I will change', right? That's the only way that I can make sure you don't get hurt again, and also protect you."

He had that same calm attitude from before... no, there was something slightly different now. He looked like a proper man.

Camilla found herself staring at him for a moment without words, then, realizing what she was doing with a shiver of embarrassment, she glared at Alois to hide it. Trying to pull herself back into shape in her mind, she swept aside her hair with a hand on her hip and stuck out her chest.

As she looked up at Alois, who looked down at her, she spoke out boldly.

"That goes without saying! How can you say you'll marry someone if you can't even protect them!"

"Yes. I'll do what I can. I'll show you that I'm worthy of marrying you."

In the face of Camilla's challenge, Alois nodded firmly.

The smile he wore below his narrowed red eyes was warm and gentle, with all the sincerity in the world.



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The food that Alois had been eating, as well as the dish it was prepared upon, had been destroyed in the maelstrom of rampant magical energy.

But, by the next morning, it seems like the maids had cleaned up the shattered remains of the dish, as well as everything else that had been destroyed in the storeroom.

The same was true of the office where he had first ingested the poison. The cracked plate had been cleared away, as well as the food that had been thrown to the floor with it.

But, it really was quite the disturbance. It was difficult to clean up properly after such a thing. There were still some errant pieces of the countless amount of debris hidden in the shadows of the room or under the shelves. But, Alois didn't have any intention of chastising anyone for it.

That turbulent night had eventually passed into the next day. As Alois sat in his office that morning, brightened by the sun's rays, he began to think to himself.

Perhaps it was because of that awful display last night? For some reason, his head felt clearer than it had in a long time. Even though the last of his father's plates were used to serve him his breakfast this morning, he didn't feel anything when he looked at it. It was as if the shades of his father and mother, that had burrowed themselves away in his heart, really had faded into nothing.

On the other hand, Alois felt the magical power that had long since lay dormant in him begin to awake. The magical power that he had sealed away with his own feelings of guilt and despair began to flow through his veins. But, it wasn't something he couldn't control. Soon enough, it would feel like just another part of his body.

He was still slightly anxious about what 'change' might really mean. He had no doubts that there would be fierce resistance. But, now that his mind was clear, he was determined to take steps forward, no matter what stood in his way. And for sure, he had Camilla to thank for that.

The first thing he had to do was consider the most pressing problem he was facing straight away.

That was, the poison that had been intended to take Alois' life.

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“Lord Alois! I was worried when I didn't see you in your room, and now I find you here!?”

When Camilla found Alois sitting behind his desk, she scolded him straight away. Camilla didn't knock and wait for Alois to allow her to enter his office, she simply stepped straight through the doors and began speaking as soon as she laid eyes on him.

“Are you really feeling better enough to walk around? What's more, to be working at a time like this!?”

Why wasn't he taking his rest? She had come to check on him in his room, but as she did she ran into the doctor from the day before who told her that Alois had already gotten out of bed early that morning, and here he was. She couldn't believe what she was hearing and double checked his room only to find an empty bed. If anything, she felt like a fool for having been so worried in the first place.

"I even heard that you've eaten breakfast!? How can you eat something like that now!?"

The type of breakfast that Alois was served on a daily basis was absolutely not something that should be served to someone recovering from poisoning and needing their rest. As per usual, it was a veritable mountain of sugary and salty food, awash in a sea of oil and fat. It's really abnormal that he was even able to take a single bite in his condition.

Alois, though, just smiled. As he stood up, he thought of a good excuse as he opened his mouth.

But, whatever he was going to say, the words never left his lips.

"Lord Alois, please step aside from that woman at once!"

It was because, before he could say anything, a senior maid rushed into the room, her face stern and thunderous.

Behind that senior maid, a few other maids waited. As they stepped into the office, Alois noticed that they were a mix of senior and new maids, and the same could be said for the manservants who walked behind them as if they were guards.

But, all of those maids looked angry. And all of the cold hostility in their eyes were directed straight at Camilla.

'That woman' ... there was no doubt in Alois' mind who they were talking about. Even the manservants standing behind looked warily at Camilla.

"What is it?"

Not remembering the face of the maid, Camilla spoke out brusquely. But, she barely paid Camilla a glance. Turning once again to Alois, she appealed to him desperately.

"That woman is the one who poisoned you! She was plotting for you to die so that she could take over the Montchat family! She really is just as despicable as all the rumours said!"

"...What is the meaning of this?"

Alois frowned deeply as he stared back at her. The maid nodded, misunderstanding his reaction.

"We've discovered evidence! Conclusive proof that this woman was the one who added poison to your meal!"

As she said so, the senior maid brought out a small white box from her breast side pocket. When she saw it, Camilla suddenly raised her voice.

It was a tiny and delicate looking box, that fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. There was no way she'd mistake it for anything else. She had been looking for it for days.

"That... that is mine!"

The present that Klaus had given her. A small box full of candied white Sehnsucht flowers. She had wondered if she would ever see it again, but here it was, in that maid's hand.

"That's right. See, she even confesses to it? That this box is hers!"

"It is mine, but... what do you mean by confessing?"

"Can you tell me what's in this box?"

"What's inside...? They're just candied flowers."

As Camilla answered like that, the maids suddenly exchanged glances with each other. It seems as if that was the answer they expected. There wasn't any surprise in their eyes, just steely seriousness.

"...Last night, I brought Alois' his meal."

Then, the senior maid began to speak.

"The dishes prepared in the kitchen are further seasoned by a group of servants. When that was done, I brought the food and drink up to Alois' room with the assistance of two other maids. Isn't that right?"

As she looked behind her, two of the maids nodded.

Both of them were younger girls. They weren't the kind of maids who could directly serve Alois. Thinking that, Camilla frowned at them, sending a chill up the two young girls' spines as they shivered at the heavy atmosphere.

"Tell everyone what the dish consisted of."

At the senior maid's words, the two younger maids looked at each other. Even though both of them were obviously frightened, the slightly taller one stepped forward.

"...It was a meat dish. The dish consisted of meat, vegetables and it was garnished with flowers. The flowers were sunken into the fa... I mean, into the soup. They seemed faded, like the colour had been drained out of them... they looked pale and white to me."

"That's right. Flowers."

Listening to the maid's testimony, the senior maid nodded. Then, she turned to look at one of the senior manservants.

"When were the flowers added to the dish? Tell us."

This time, it was a middle aged attendant who spoke. Unlike the maid, he spoke without a single tremor in his voice.

"By the time I came to season it, the dish had already been garnished with those flowers. I am absolutely certain of this. I rearranged the flower garnish on the plate and seasoned the dish to the Master's tastes. After that, I gave it over to the maids."

“...Why are you constantly talking about the flowers?”

Camilla was beginning to get irritated. The way the senior maid was talking around the point instead of getting straight to it was frustrating her. Just come out with it, why are you bringing up these flowers? And in the first place, just why were the candied flowers Camilla had been given even added to Alois' food at all?

“How can you still be so shameless!?”

But, in response to Camilla's words, the senior maid spat venomously. There had to be something that was giving her such confidence, to talk like this even in the presence of Alois.

“Look at this!”

The maid raised her voice, and opened the box in her hand. Then, she pressed it forward, so that both Alois and Camilla could see.

“These flowers are toxic! When they were soaked into the soup, they turned that dish into a horrible poison!”

The white candied flowers that Camilla knew weren't in that box.

The only way they resembled the Sehnsucht was their shape. But, they weren't white, instead, their colour was a deep and vibrant shade of crimson.

Poisonous flowers, that resembled drops of blood.

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At first glance, the contents of the box were just normal flowers.

However, the truth was that the flowers had been tampered with. A crimson shaded poison coated the surface, that would dissolve along with its colour into any liquid it came into contact with.

As they all looked silently at the flowers, the senior maid looked even more confident. They looked truly poisonous, had a queerly sweet scent to them, and most of all, Camilla had admitted they were hers.

An attendant who knew more about poisons could examine it safely later, but the truth of the matter was already clear enough.

“Just as I expected, you really are as vile as the stories suggest.”

The senior maid said that, as she sharply closed the box in her hand. Then, after taking a deep breath, she turned to the servants behind her and commanded them with confidence.

“Seize her at once. Arrest this woman and have her locked up immediately!”

“Wait.”

Alois finally rose from his chair, to ward off the manservants who had taken a step forward at the maid’s command. But, of course, Camilla had reached the absolute limits of her patience much faster than Alois had.

“Stop spouting utter nonsense however you please! You mean to say that I poisoned Lord Alois!?”

Even Alois’ voice was drowned out as Camilla continued to shout at the senior maid.

“I had no part in it! I don’t know anything about all this!”

“You just said that this belonged to you! Do you truly believe you can shout your way out of this now!?”

“Someone has switched the contents! In the first place, I lost that box days ago!”

There had been some time between Camilla first realizing that the box had gone missing from her room and Alois being poisoned. More than enough time for someone to switch the contents.

So, just why had the contents been swapped? That wasn’t difficult to figure out either. When she was back in the royal capital, situations like this weren’t an uncommon sight in the slightest.

“Someone is attempting to frame me as the culprit!”

“How utterly barefaced! Who on earth would want to frame you in the first place!?”

The maid began to raise her voice to match Camilla’s.

“...Why is there such a commotion so early in the day?”

A cold voice suddenly cut straight through the cacophonous office. Everyone in the room, including Camilla and the senior maid who had been shouting at each other just a moment ago, turned to look at the owner of that cool voice, who had so effortlessly quieted the room.

“This is Lord Alois’ study. I would have you refrain from causing an uproar here.”

As she looked at the servants in the room, her expression was as hard as steel. It was Gerda, the chief maid.

At the sudden intimidating glare, the senior maid’s shoulders went slightly stiff, but she managed to keep talking.

“Miss Gerda! Please, listen to this! This woman is the one behind it! This woman... she attempted to murder Lord Alois with poison!”

“That’s false! I did not do anything of the sort!”

“There is evidence, as well as witnesses! This woman did something with these flowers, and then added them to the cooking! She made them into poisonous flowers!”

“I never did anything like that at all! In the first place, what possible reason could I have to poison Lord Alois!?”

Gerda looked between the two woman who bellowed at once another. But, as she did, surprise never crossed her face, she simply listened to the words being said impassively.

“I see, I understand the situation now. You’ve found the poison, have you? The flowers that garnished the dish? It’s certainly true that flowers were found after Lord Alois collapsed.”

Gerda looked at the senior maid. As if feeling a sense of relief wash over her, the maid looked less tense. It was easy to tell whose side Gerda had fallen on from her words alone.

“I couldn’t allow this office to stay so defiled for long, so I ordered it cleaned, but in truth, we should have investigated more thoroughly at the time. That was my mistake. No, rather, it was a mistake to allow this woman to be anywhere near Lord Alois in the first place.”

“W-wait just a moment! I did not do it! Don’t suddenly decide these things by yourself!!”

Camilla’s suddenly interjected as Gerda looked to start building a definitive story. It was clear from Gerda’s words that she had already pinned Camilla as the culprit. It was natural if one thought about it; she and Camilla had been enemies since the moment they met.

“And like I said earlier, I have no reason to do this at all!! Something like harming Lord Alois, tell me why I would ever want to do that!?”

“There is a reason. Lord Alois has been avoiding you recently. I’ve also been told that your engagement has been pulled off the table and you are to be sent back to the royal capital.”

No matter how fierce and high-strung Camilla’s angry shout was, just as always, Gerda’s voice was low and cold.

“I am sure that you feared to lose your engagement to the Duke, did you not? His Highness, the Second Prince, despises you, and word has already spread that the Storm family has abandoned you, adopting a new daughter in your place. There is nowhere for you to return to back in the royal capital. That’s why you continued to chase after Lord Alois, despite how much he loathed you.”

“Gerda, that’s a misunderstanding. The reason that I was avoiding her was because of my own depression. I have no intention of sending her back to the royal capital now.”

Even though Alois interjected, Gerda shook her head. It was as if Alois’ objection counted for nothing against the narrative she was building.

“Lord Alois, what your feelings were in this matter is irrelevant. Even if you truly did think that Lord Alois, what truly matters is what this woman thought was the reality of the situation. What her truth was. She believed that she was being abandoned by you, Lord Alois, and therefore she resorted to poison.”

“...If she killed me, then she could hardly marry me.”

“Yes. However, she believed that even were you to live, she couldn’t marry you either. Therefore, she must have believed it better to kill you instead. And, should the circumstances arise where you would survive the poisoning, she could then take advantage of your moment of weakness in an attempt to change your feelings.”

Alois stopped speaking, a deep frown creasing his brow. He crossed his arms, listening to Gerda explain her version of events, watching her with enigmatic eyes.

“In fact, even now, that woman is attempting to mould you to her own liking. She herself is the real poison. Those poisonous red flowers planted in your food, that is the true face of Camilla Storm. A woman full of low cunning, whose acts disturbed the peace of the royal capital.”

Her voice resolute, Gerda began to walk towards Alois. Her back was straight, her face was held high, and her eyes never wavered. Those words of hers held a provocative power, and that intelligent and upright face made her words difficult to refute. If she wasn’t the one who was being snared in a trap, Camilla may have even believed her as well.

As proof of that, all the servants in the room seemed utterly convinced by the case Gerda had made. The looks that they sent towards Camilla teetered between hatred, disgust, and abject fear.

“Lord Alois...”

Trying to tell him that it wasn’t true, that she really was innocent, Camilla looked at Alois. But, only after sparing a quick glance to Camilla, he immediately turned to look back at Gerda.

Behind that firm expression, there was a sense of sadness in his eyes. As if he was disappointed... as if he had been betrayed.

The words Camilla was going to use to appeal to him died on her tongue. Instead of talking to the now silent Camilla, Alois instead asked Gerda.

“The poison... I heard that it had been used to garnish the dish before it left the kitchen. There are a lot of cooks working in the kitchen. Surely, they would have seen if something was amiss?”

“No. That woman, she has been frequently coming and going from the kitchen for quite some time now. I’ve heard that she has become acquainted with the head chef. It would not be unthinkable that something as minor as garnishing a dish with a flower decoration would be overlooked. In fact, it is possible that the reason she had been so regularly visiting the kitchens was for such a purpose, from the very beginning. She is a cunning woman, after all.”

“I see.”

Alois closed his eyes, taking a deep breath as his eyes stayed closed.

“Your story makes sense.”

“Lord Alois!? I didn’t-!”

She didn’t do it. Alois of all people should understand that. If Camilla and Alois’ roles were swapped, she would never believe it.

“There is also a motive, as well as the opportunity to poison. What’s more, evidence was found. Certainly, it is all too suspicious. I understand the case you’re making.”

But, Alois wasn’t the same. He nodded at Gerda’s words. Gerda nodded back, obediently accepting his reaction.

Perhaps, despite everything, these two really did have a bond as a master and servant who had lived in the same house for many years? In front of Camilla, who was still stunned into silence, Alois let out a deep breath as if he was lifting something off his mind, then spoke.

“But, there is one thing in your story that bothers me, Gerda.”

Disappointment, sadness, a sense of betrayal as well as an odd conviction, all mixed together into a strange sort of expression Camilla had never seen him, nor anyone, wear before. And that look, it was pointed straight at Gerda.

“...How do you know *what colour* the flowers were?”

Gerda had certainly said ‘poisonous red flowers’.

But, the box in the maid’s hand that contained them, had been *closed before Gerda entered the room*.

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“The colour of the flowers?”

Gerda repeated Alois’ words back at him. The only reaction she had was to raise a single eyebrow, there wasn’t even a flicker of panic or surprise on her face.

“I do not understand what you are trying to say. As I said, I attended to you after you fell, I must have had a glance at them then.”

But, although Gerda answered clearly, the senior maid and one of the manservants accompanying her had gone pale. It was the man who had testified about seasoning the dish.

Both of them glanced to the side as if trying to avoid Alois’ gaze.

The only one who faced Alois straight on, her will not faltering at all, was Gerda. The flowers were red. There was no doubt about that.

“After I fell...?”

Alois sighed gently, remembering the flowers that had garnished the meal.

“At that time, I covered up the flowers. I didn’t think it was poison, but... I wanted to avoid any misunderstandings.”

Alois saw Camilla in those flowers. With the visit to the flowering town of Blume fresh in his mind, it was easy to couple Camilla with them. He didn’t remember if he was consciously thinking it at the time, but looking back, he must have done it to try and cover for Camilla.

When Alois had grabbed them with his hands, those flowers had been crushed in his palm. The process to candy those flowers had made them brittle and delicate, and after being grasped like that, they could hardly be distinguished as flowers anymore, especially if they were only paid a passing glance, as Gerda suggested.

What’s more, Gerda also said that she had ordered everything to be cleaned up immediately after Alois was seen to.

“Are you really sure that you saw those flowers here?”

“...Perhaps you didn’t cover them up as well as you thought, Lord Alois. I am absolutely certain that I saw those flowers with my own two eyes. Those poisonous flowers that hurt you.”

“So, you’re saying that you are absolutely certain?”

Saying that to confirm Gerda’s testimony, his gaze shifted away from her.

Instead, they came to settle on the younger maids, the ones who had been brought along by the senior maid.

“Can you repeat what you said a moment ago?”

The two maids looked at each other. At the same time, without saying a word, the senior maid glowered thunderously at the two girls. The maids shuddered in fright at the glare, but it seemed like they had already made up their mind all the same. They nodded to each other clearly, then the taller one began to speak.

“When we brought the meal to Lord Alois, there definitely weren’t any red flowers. There were only white flowers on the food. I’m definitely sure of that!”

“I see, so that’s how it is. The most likely possibility was that the poisonous flowers lost their colour as they were being delivered along with the food. Indeed, by the time I saw them, they had already become white.”

That’s why it had reminded him of Camilla in Blume. The field of white flowers. The garland she wore like a crown. Ever since then, Alois always tied her and those flowers together in his mind.

“Gerda, let me ask you one more time... did you truly see those flowers?”

Gerda didn’t answer straight away.

She simply stood straight, looking at Alois. But that expression of hers... had become ever so slightly stiffer.

“If you hadn’t seen it, then why did you say you had? And even if you had, why did you testify that you’d seen their original colour when you couldn’t possibly have?”

Even if Alois didn’t say it, the intention in the words he spoke to Gerda was perfectly clear. Gerda had only seen the flowers when they had still retained their poisonous colour. In that sense, she wasn’t the one who had necessarily added the poison flowers herself, since she would have seen their colour fade.

But, there was the potential for co-conspirators. Instead of dirtying her hands by garnishing the food with poison herself, Gerda could have had someone else do it.

“Miss Gerda...”

The senior maid’s voice trembled as she called out to Gerda. But Gerda quickly opened her mouth to drown her out.

“Colour and the like are mere trivialities. I must have merely misremembered. Since the flowers were the root of the poison, something associated with the colour red, I likely said it inadvertently. It isn’t out of the ordinary for such things to happen.”

Her voice was calm and assured, carrying a level of authoritative power to it.

“In the first place, there is ample evidence, as well as multiple witnesses. A simple mistake on my part will not change the truth of the matter.”

“If you admit that your own memories of events were wrong, then it’s only reasonable to assume that the same could be true of others as well.”

Others. Alois didn’t mention anyone specifically, but his gaze lingered on those two who had specifically testified against Camilla.

“Where did you find the box?”

The first one he addressed was the senior maid. She hesitated when Alois asked her that question for just a moment, before going back and reading from the script.

“It was found in that woman’s room. All the maids assigned to cleaning know that box is there.”

“...That can’t be true! I haven’t been able to find the box for over a week! Days before Lord Alois’ collapsed!”

Her passions reignited, Camilla refuted the senior maid’s words on a spur of the moment.

“Both Nicole and I knew that! If you think that I am lying, then all you need to do is ask Nicole!”

“Nicole!? A useless maid who hasn’t even been working here a year!? What’s more, why would anyone believe that girl when she’s just your lackey!?”

“I disagree.”

Alois interjected between the two of them.

“Even the most distinguished maid in this household acknowledged that she recalled events wrongly. Therefore, we shouldn’t decide whether or not to believe someone based on their position. The words of that young maid are worth just as much as yours.”

“Lord Alois...!”

The senior maid looked at Alois aghast, as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had built up a high position of influence in the household after years of faithful service to successive Dukes. For someone to say that her word was only as good as that immature girl’s, it was a deep wound to her pride.

“If the box wasn’t in her room, then potentially it was found somewhere completely different. Perhaps your memory of the box being found in her room was also a *mistake*.”

“But, that’s...!”

Alois turned away from the maid whose pride was in tatters. Next was the manservant. As soon as Alois’ gaze settled on him, his back became rigid.

“That the dish had already been garnished with flowers before being delivered from the kitchens. I wonder if this too was a *mistake*? Instead of relying on one person’s testimony, I think it’s important to hear what the people working in the kitchen have to say as well.”

“As if you could believe such uncouth thugs!?”

The servant raised his voice angrily. Other than Günter, there were other close and distant relatives of the Brandt family working in Alois’ kitchen. The Brandts had been cast down from their peerage and were looked at with disdain by members of the other noble houses. Although their practical skills, especially cooking, were unmatched, they were still treated like lepers by the other aristocratic families of Mohnton.

“Perhaps we’ll find that their memories may, in fact, be more correct.”

Gerda flinched at those words. Since she had said that she was ‘absolutely certain’, just like the others had, she had cast aspersions on their own testimonies through her own mistake. The credibility of their words had turned to dust by her hand.

“Lord Alois. I admit that I may have remembered wrongly, but that does not clear this woman of suspicion.”

Casting a glance at the downcast senior maid and the manservant who had been stunned into silence, she kept speaking.

“We have served this house faithfully for many years. Our loyalty has always been to House Montchat, and we’ve always strived to do our best for its sake. When it comes to whose words are worth believing and whose are lies... I implore you to make a wise judgment.”

Gerda joined her hands in front of her waist and bowed deeply to Alois. If one had only heard those words and seen that bow, then one would only have the impression that she was an obedient and faithful servant, and totally in the right.

“Certainly... I cannot say you haven’t been faithful.”

Putting the good of the Montchat family first, they worked around the clock for the betterment of the house. They paid excruciating detail when it came to managing and maintaining the mansion, and Gerda knew the position of every piece of furniture and the name of every servant.

The young Alois always relied on Gerda. Even though she was overly firm and incredibly close-minded, she never put a foot wrong when it came to keeping the house in working order. That’s why he had never thought of removing her from her position.

“But, in truth, it was only the ‘House of Montchat’ that you were loyal to.”

And the person who represented the house, was its master. For the sake of the Montchat family, she wouldn’t hesitate to kill Alois if need be.

“Like you said, I cannot simply dismiss the suspicions you’ve brought up. Indeed, your story has weight to it. However, if I consider the same events but with you as the poisoner, the story has just as much credibility.”

The red flowers could now be used as evidence against both Camilla and Gerda. There was no definitive proof or unassailable testimony to convict either of them, so all he had left were his own doubts.

Camilla? Or Gerda? Or would he back down, pretending he hadn’t already decided?

Gerda had entrusted the decision to Alois. Simply put, Alois’ own feelings would bring this all to an end.

“We have only known each other for so long, but I’ve seen what kind of person she is.”

As Gerda said, Camilla could have had means and motive to poison Alois.

But, that wasn't in Camilla's character. It was unthinkable. But, the only reason Alois had to believe that really was because of what he had seen of her.

In Grenze, in Einst, and in Blume. In this mansion as well. Alois had seen all sorts of sides to Camilla.

Her fiery temper, her reckless courage, her haughty pride, and her flower-like purity. She had lost herself to raging passion, shouted at him angrily, been hurt by those around her and still found the strength to smile when all was said and done. For both good and ill, she was more human than anyone Alois had ever met.

In this house, she had been the polar opposite to Alois, held back his emotions and never showing a sincere side of himself, always wearing a mask to hide away his feelings.

Alois raised his head. The past to which he had clung to and those old memories they carried. Fear and guilt caused a moment of hesitation.

When it came to this mansion, Gerda was the greatest symbol of his father. All the older servants that still referred to his father as 'Master' were under her influence. When Alois had been overwhelmed by the pain of his past, he had looked to her for support.

But, the time had come to cast it all aside. Alois had been held back by the ghosts that haunted him for far too long.

"Between you and her... if I have to choose, then I believe in her."

The pain of the past had passed into memory.

Now, there was only Duke Alois Montchat, Lord of Mohnton.

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The male servants that the senior maid had brought with her to apprehend Camilla, eventually ended up taking Gerda and the others into custody instead.

Although the senior maid and manservant were stunned and angered, protesting their innocence, Gerda remained calm.

But, the gaze she fixed on Alois made her feelings clear. It was the same way she sometimes stared at Camilla, full of cold hatred and virulent disgust.

“How foolish... you’ve made a truly foolish choice.”

Gerda spoke those words softly. The fact that she didn’t offer any resistance as she was lead away either was strange in of itself.

“Just how faithful I truly am to the Montchat family, you will soon come to know it.”

There were a group of servants who had overheard the noise standing outside the office. When Gerda and the other two senior servants, some of the most influential in the house, were led away, their eyes were opened wide in shock.

With her arm being held by a manservant, Gerda left Alois’ office without another word. She was to be placed under house arrest at another location near the capital. But, that was only a temporary measure until she was fully convicted. After evidence and witness testimony was collected, she would be put on trial in Mohnton’s capital. From that point on, she was at the mercy of the court.

Despite not admitting any guilt, she accepted that fate and didn’t protest.

Gerda didn’t pay any attention to the gawking spectators as she emerged into the hallway either. Except for just one of them, who she stopped next to for just a moment.

“I leave the rest to you.”

The only person whose tenure in this house and serving this family could rival Gerda’s own was that man’s; Vilmer. After giving him a brief look, she kept walking without saying another word, never once stopping or turning back around.

○

After that, for a few days, the mansion was in quite an uproar.

The head maid, as well as her most senior assistant, had been arrested. Since those two people were the ones who managed all the female servants in the house, the chaos left in their wake was immense. A lot of people who didn’t know the full story gossiped about whether Alois had suddenly lost his mind.

But, no one would complain if Alois quickly plugged up the holes he had left in removing those two. It seems that he was also reviewing the servants in his employ generally now.

“It’s probably necessary to reconsider everyone who works in the mansion.”

The day after the commotion in his office, Alois had told Camilla as much during their first meal together in what had felt like a while.

“Especially the people who were employed here when my father was Duke. It will be a painful splinter to pull out, but it will only get worse the longer I leave it in.”

The fatigue in Alois’ eyes was obvious. He was always the type to put work before rest and considering recent events that was even truer than before.

Although she wanted to do what she could to help, Camilla’s status was still technically just a guest of the House of Montchat. It would be a breach of propriety for a guest to interfere in the internal running of the house.

If that was the case, then what could she do?

She had known the answer to that question for quite some time already.

The only problem is, just how would she go about telling him?

○

“This ain’t gonna do at all.”

Although the rest of the house had been in an uproar following the arrests, the kitchen hadn’t changed much as Günter shook his head at Camilla’s latest batch of cookies.

“I like them though! They taste sort of homely.”

Nicole, who had become something of a regular taster for Camilla’s cookies, said that between bites. Still, she didn’t exactly have the biggest appetite in the world so Nicole had been giving some out to the maids in the house she had become friends with, but they had been received well with them also.

– But...

“There’s no point if they taste this simple.”

Despite Nicole’s compliments, Camilla still looked irritated. A simple taste. In other words, something that tasted amateurish.

Alois overcame his past. What’s more, it seemed like just as he had lifted those burdensome memories from himself, so too had he shed away weight. He almost seemed to be getting thinner and thinner by the day. The way the people in the mansion addressed him had changed as well. He was no longer the ‘Master’s son’, but the ‘Master’ instead. There had initially been some disgruntlement over the servants being reviewed, but it had also done a lot to solidify Alois’ newfound status with them all.

So, with that being the case, Camilla too had to show that she could leave the past behind.

– I’m certain that I can make these cookies for Lord Alois.

She would make him something delicious and show that she had left that part of her past behind as well. Then, Camilla felt like she could finally give him the reply he had been waiting for.

She still felt she had to stick to her principles, after all.

– But, I cannot afford to let him eat anything so ordinary...!

Camilla took as much pride as she could in her cooking. The fact that she was still virtually a layman when it came to making sweets was like a black stain on her honour.

“I need to bake something delicious! Please do a better job of teaching me from now on!”

“Y’know, I really have never seen someone ask for favours with so much damned attitude before.”

“If that’s the case, you should be honoured to see me do such a thing for the first time!”

Camilla laughed haughtily as Günter scratched at his hair. Nicole giggled softly with a bright smile. In contrast to the ever-busy Alois, the kitchen was peaceful.

In the first place, the kitchen had always been Günter’s domain, and he had always been someone Alois could rely on. So when the news came through about Gerda’s arrest, both Günter and the kitchen staff accepted it without much of any fuss.

Thanks to that, Camilla spent even more time in the kitchen than ever before, leaving untold piles of cookie dough and failed prototypes in her wake.

But, peaceful days never truly last.

○

It had been barely half a month since Gerda had been arrested. The news spread fast, by the hoofbeats of the messengers’ horses.

Dissatisfied with Alois’ rule, the people finally rose up.

The Meyerheim family raised the banner to which the others flocked. Houses Lörrich and Ende followed suit, and soon all the major towns except the territory’s capital and Grenze had risen in rebellion, rallying to the Meyerheims’ cause.

It was a full-scale revolt.

To my dear sister,

Big sister Camilla, how are you faring? It is your one and only Therese. Because I never received a reply to all of the letters I sent you, I'm still sick with worry.

Do you still have your health? Are you living comfortably? Have you run into any troubles? Because I do not know what kind of things you're going through, my sister, I can't help but be anxious.

It may be unthinkable, but perhaps you've gotten too comfortable living in the depths of the swamp, and don't want to talk to me anymore? Becoming the wife of a toad, not returning any of my letters and leaving behind your family... that's far too cruel.

Ah, well, perhaps that's not beyond you, dear sister. After all, it wouldn't be the first time that my sister would leave her family out in the cold, would it?

But, I am different from you, my sister.

Therefore, I shall properly warn you.

Soon, you really will face a deep crisis. And with your power alone, it is not something you can hope to overcome. No matter how much you selfishly scream like you always do, or rail against others in anger, no one will come to protect you. Father and mother are not on your side any longer. Everyone will become your enemy.

But, I am different. If you call me sister as well and take my hand, then I will be the only one that can help you.

Because that's what family is for, right? Isn't it true that you discover who your real family are when times are tough?

Miss Liselotte and I are very close, so I am in a position to help you, dear sister.

In the past, you once refused to take my hand.

But that same hand is the only thing you can rely on now, sister.

Please make sure to remember that in the times to come.

*From your cute little sister,
Therese*

It was a mother's love that kept Julian locked away in that cold and dark tower.

There were seldom any visitors. His father and the first queen would occasionally visit.

Being in that tower was almost as if he were still in his mother's womb. It kept the outside world at bay, neither letting Julian experience it nor letting it harm him. He never met a child around his own age, nor did he know pain or hardship. It must have been love that placed him there. But, it was a selfish, smothering love.

In that never-changing world he shared with his mother, Julian had naught to do but watch that mother of his grow ever more frail and sickly. When his mother had eventually succumbed to her illness, as much as Julian grieved, there must have also been a spark of relief.

After his mother's death, Julian finally left that tower.

But, the eyes that looked his way lacked for warmth. Those countless prying eyes were too much for Julian, who was like a chick leaving the nest for the first time, as he felt as if it were hard to breathe.

But the mother that would hide Julian away from those eyes, away from the world, was no longer there.

○

Those homemade cookies had a simple taste.

But when he ate them, for whatever reason, he suddenly felt tears run down his cheek.

Sitting next to him, there was a girl who burst into tears just like Julian had. He found it funny that he was suddenly crying alongside this little girl who he had never met before, and began to laugh through the tears.

It felt like the first time that Julian could truly breathe in the air of this unfamiliar outside world.

Julian didn't know the name of the girl who gave him those cookies.

He was sure that the girl didn't know who Julian was either. Or rather, the person she was looking at didn't look like Julian at all.

Until his magical power was brought under control, Julian's physical form would continue to change. With his mother gone, someone would have to substitute. Even the first queen, his elder brother and his father had only ever seen Julian under the influence of that magic. There were only very few people who had ever seen the true Julian.

But... at that time, he felt like he wanted someone else to remember what he looked like.

"Can we meet again someday?"

In response to the girl who said that, Julian then taught her a single spell. It was a dispel magic, handed down through the generations of the royal family.

Julian had the girl cast the magic on him.

The spellcurse that his mother had cast on him was dissolved.

Silver hair. Red eyes. Those distinguishing features of the royal family.

When the girl looked at him in astonishment, Julian smiled.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

Then, Julian stood up.

In the distance, he could hear the voices of people looking for him. He had slipped away from his mother’s funeral for too long. The ever so slight panic in the voices calling out for him made it obvious. He’d have to be heading back soon.

“So, no matter what I look like... Once again, I’m sure you’ll find me.”

As he said that, Julian left the girl behind, running towards the sounds of the voices.

For some reason, the air wasn’t stifling anymore.

“Oi oi, dad... that’s just insane.”

In the Lörriich mansion in the heart of Blume, Klaus spat those words out in exasperation as he stood in the family head’s room.

Klaus felt an unfamiliar chill run up his spine, more fitting for the dead of winter than the light of spring. The sun had begun to dip below the horizon, the dusk’s light streaming through the windows casting large shadows across the room.

Klaus faced the current head of the Lörriich family, as well as his father; Rudolph. Even though Klaus’ face had lost some colour, Rudolph’s face looked almost ashen as his eyes gazed downwards.

“I was wondering what was going on when you suddenly began arming, but this? Uncle’s ambitions are nothing compared to all this. Do you seriously even understand what you just said yourself?”

As Klaus confronted him, Rudolph shook his head slightly.

“I know. But, it’s something that only the three heads of the families that serve the Montchat and others close to them know about. It’s a secret that has to be kept, no matter what the cost. At least, that’s what sister said...”

“Well, yeah, ain’t that the damn truth. Something like that, do you know just what would happen if it spilled...!?”

Rudolph looked up at Klaus, who held his head with an angry sigh. There was a slight glint of relief in his eyes, as if he could finally unload at least some of this heavy burden that had been hoisted onto his shoulders suddenly onto Klaus’ as well. But, the one suddenly being pressed upon wasn’t so meek about accepting it.

“And, so, why the hell are you telling me this now? Ah, shit, now that I think about it...”

Klaus came to a realization. He’d always been wondering; just what had been the point of Lucas and Gerda’s antagonism over all these years?

Lucas was a passionate and ambitious man, but he was hardly someone that couldn’t be controlled. Someone who always worked so obviously in his own interest would be simple to entice or to trap. So long as Gerda played her cards right, she could have Lucas do whatever she pleased. But despite having the ability to do that, Gerda had instead always chosen to confront him directly.

If it were simply a matter of manageability, then Lucas would have been a much better candidate as the next leader of the family than Klaus. Klaus had no intention to even listen to Gerda’s intentions, much less carry them to fruition. Klaus would do what was best for the town, according to his own principles. Perhaps, he would actually stand opposed to Gerda on most things.

But yet, Gerda had been determined to have Klaus as the heir.

“Because uncle also had designs on the royal family. There’s no way someone like him could’ve been let in on it.”

The reason why Klaus was more suitable was precisely due to the fact he didn't possess that sort of towering ambition. He wasn't blindly passionate either. He knew that certain things were important to bring to the light with a sense of justice, whilst others were best left in the dark.

And this secret was something that needed to be kept well in the shadows. For the sake of House Lörlich, for the sake of Blume... and for the sake of himself.

"...Hey, Klaus. What am I supposed to do now?"

As Klaus ground his teeth in frustration, Rudolph looked at him imploringly. When his father called out to him with such those childish words, Klaus' expression only darkened further.

Rudolph, the man who was supposed to be his father, called out to his son like a child begging for help.

"Because sister is gone, I don't know what to do anymore. You understand that, don't you? You're the one she chose, after all..."

Rudolph's sister and Klaus' aunt, Gerda, had been taken into custody around half a month prior. The news that she had allegedly poisoned Duke Alois didn't take long to reach Blume.

Gerda was the true power behind the Lörlich family. But, despite the loss of their leader, the house wasn't thrown into chaos. When Rudolph heard about his sister's arrest, he didn't panic, but instead immediately began to muster troops. With Lucas' mercenaries who had been looking for a new employer alongside the levies he recruited from the town, he pledged his newly formed forces alongside the other noble families to rebel against the House of Montchat.

He didn't heed Klaus' or anyone else's opposition to his actions, and achieved all this within less than two weeks. But, suddenly, he was at a loss.

"Sister only had instructions for me up to this far. But, what do I do now? Should we just fight like this? Or do nothing? The Meyerheims say they're going to launch an all-out attack, but if I joined in, would sister scold me?"

Rudolph was the sort of man that followed orders to the letter. Despite how absurd and difficult Gerda's order must have been on such short notice, he had managed to do it all the same. He was skilled at moving the levers of localized power, in that there was no doubt. From a bystander's point of view, he was an excellent family patriarch.

But, he was barely a shadow of that now. Not even Klaus knew just how pathetic a man his father could really be. He was a useful puppet, but once the puppeteer was gone, he was merely a pretty toy, sitting uselessly on a shelf.

There was something in his father made him think of Alois.

Perhaps, Rudolph was the ideal certain people pushed for Alois to be. If he had never met Camilla, perhaps Klaus would have gone on hating what Alois would become. An empty shell, devoid of personality, that danced to the tune of others. An ideal person for someone like Gerda.

"Klaus, please tell me. Surely you know which path to take next? That's why sister chose you, isn't it?"

Rudolph reached out, taking Klaus' hand in his.

“Sister is always right about everything. All I need to do is follow her advice.”

“...The hell do you mean, ‘right’?”

Klaus couldn’t hold it back anymore, a slight tremor in his low voice. He couldn’t even understand his own father anymore.

“You’ve done something you can’t take back, you know!? This is a flat out rebellion! It’s treason, a crime against the peace of the land!!”

“But, sister told me this was the right thing to do! Sister has never made a mistake, she can’t make a mistake!”

“And because of that, you’ve put our entire house at risk! It’s not just the Lörriich family either! Both Blume, and even all of Mohnton, everything could go up in flames!”

“It wasn’t me!”

Klaus could feel Rudolph’s nails dig into the backs of his hand. Even as he felt the blood drip down his wrist, he was so incensed that he didn’t feel the pain.

“It’s what sister told me to do! The Meyerheims sent out their instructions and the Ende family followed suit! All I’m doing is obeying the traditions of this land!!”

“But, you’re the head of the family!”

“The head is all I am!”

Hearing just how strained his voice sounded, Rudolph covered his mouth. He looked around in a panic, but there was no one else in the room. There was only Klaus, his shadow looming ever larger as the sun continued to set.

“There’s no helping it, can’t you see...?”

After exhaling, Rudolph’s voice changed completely, as if he were trying to convince his son with sweeter words.

“Because, if we go against things like this, will end up like the Brandts. We’d all lose our positions, be chased out of town and have to live in the shadows. How could I let that happen? As the head of the family? As a father?”

“Dad.”

Klaus was beginning to feel the pain of just how hard his father was grasping his hand now.

“Hey, Klaus... You’re the only one I have now.”

As darkness began to fill the room more and more, Rudolph’s voice grew softer.

“Please, tell me. I’ll listen to whatever you say.”

Klaus’ face twisted as if he was holding back a laugh. It was just as he said, this man would do whatever Klaus wanted him to. Because of that, he didn’t care for right and wrong, so long as he was told what to do.

What a blissful existence that must be.

“Klaus...”

Rudolph’s eyes looked at him, full of hope and expectations.

No matter what, Klaus was chosen by Gerda. He couldn’t be wrong.

He would transmit Gerda’s intentions perfectly, and Rudolph could go back to being a happy little puppet. That would keep the Lörriich family, as well as Rudolph himself, away from a ruinous end.

That’s what he believed.

“...You think too much of me, dad.”

But, he didn’t understand the man in front of him. Perhaps, Klaus didn’t entirely understand himself, either.

Despite always thinking of his uncle Lucas as someone utterly contemptible, they were similar in at least one key way.

“I cannot just let things go the way my aunt wants them to.”

Klaus was someone more passionate and rash than he himself knew.

Shaking off Rudolph’s hand, Klaus kicked out at a nearby display case. All sorts of things on its shelf tumbled to the ground, and an ornamental vase shattered to pieces on the floor. Taking one of the jagged edges of the vase, Klaus slashed at his own face.

The pain was immediate this time as the blood quickly seeped down into his collar. From his temple down through into his cheek, he was surprised himself at just how much that hurt, having never had a cut like that before.

Rudolph, meanwhile, was utterly stunned. Then, Klaus suddenly threw the bloodied piece of the vase that he had cut himself with at his father. Although he was completely confused, Rudolph caught it almost reflexively.

“Klaus... what are you...”

Rudolph’s words were drowned out by the sudden sound of a number of footsteps in the hall outside. The servants, startled by the sudden unusual noise, burst into the room.

The first thing they noticed when they stepped inside was Klaus, blood streaming down his face, as well as Rudolph, who held the weapon. Before the servants could come to grips with the scene, Klaus shouted at them.

“Restrain him! We were only talking and he suddenly attacked me! He’s lost his mind!”

Rudolph could barely comprehend what Klaus was saying at first. Responding to Klaus’ words, several of the servants seized Rudolph straight away. In the meantime, it was all he could do to stare in pure shock, not offering any resistance.

As Rudolph was held on the floor, Klaus looked down on him, cradling his wound with his hand. Even in a situation like this, he didn't deny doing anything or plead his case. But, desperate for someone to tell him what to do, his eyes wandered for such a person.

"...I'll take care of the Lörriich family. So, let me see to the rest."

Klaus spat that at Rudolph, who didn't even have the spirit to respond anymore.

"But, don't think I'm just going to let you retire in comfort. Not until you know just what it is that you've done!"

Even if they were father and son, Klaus couldn't so easily forgive Rudolph.

Perhaps this was his sense of justice talking. Or, perhaps he was just disappointed in Rudolph as a father. Maybe it could well have been his anger at how he dragged his entire family into a crisis.

But, to go even further, perhaps it was for something purer that drove him to do it... such as friendship.

○

"Brother... you did that to yourself, didn't you?"

It was a day after the uproar. Franz, who entered his room without permission, said that to Klaus as he packed his things.

"You've got a sharp eye, huh?"

Klaus responded without turning around to look at him. The wound had been covered with bandages and the bleeding had stopped, but it still hurt to move his mouth.

"It's easy to see. That's not the kind of gash that someone else can give you in a fight."

"Well, you might be right about that... Was that something you learned when you had one of your little sword dates with uncle? It's surprisingly useful knowledge."

"Just why did you do something like that?"

Ignoring Klaus' joke, Franz kept speaking seriously. But, Klaus didn't stop packing. Most of his luggage were various medicines and painkillers, as well as some simple food to eat on the road. He didn't need to bring a change of clothes. He needed to travel as lightly as possible.

"Because that was the kindest way to do things."

"Kindest?"

Franz looked at his brother dubiously. From his point of view, what Klaus did was far from kind. After cutting up his own face, he declared his father a madman.

His father had been locked away in a single room of the mansion, under guard. Even though an entire day had passed, he didn't say a single word, simply staring at the wall as if the light had left his soul.

Thanks to Rudolph's behaviour, as well as the sudden and near inexplicable armament of the town's men in a rebellion against the Montchat family, it didn't take much for the household to believe Klaus and regard Rudolph as having lost his mind.

"It was the kindest way to quickly take over the household. If dad was calm, it'd be hard to convince anyone. Hell, even if dad was babbling his nonsense like before, it might have been hard if someone was suckered by it. I need to keep him under guard as well."

In the first place, there was no way he could inherit the house normally in time. He needed to take leadership straight away in order to nullify Rudolph's power and keep him under lock and key. Doing it this way satisfied all the conditions at once.

"Just what are you planning..."

"For now, I'm heading to the capital."

After finishing packing, Klaus turned back to Franz. Klaus was dressed in a travelling cloak that was easy to move in. He was ready to go straight away.

"Whilst I'm away, I'll leave you in charge of things. Make sure to keep any eye on dad. I'm pretty sure that he doesn't have the courage to do it, but make sure he doesn't hang himself or try and chew off his tongue. That guy is gonna be an important witness."

"Brother, I don't know what you're thinking of doing at all? In the first place, what do you mean by leaving it to me? I'm still under house arrest?"

Franz was still technically being held in custody at home because of everything that happened at the beginning of spring. He was forbidden to leave the house or contact anyone from the outside. At best, the only people who he could talk to were the maids that cleaned his room and clothes, as well as Klaus on occasion.

"I'll take care of your house arrest. But, as much as you can possibly do, don't let any harm come to Blume. Don't fight against the Montchat family either. Think you're up to it?"

Klaus didn't clear up Franz's doubts. As Klaus just kept saying what he wanted to say, Franz's eyes narrowed with suspicion slightly.

But, Klaus looked right back at him. After a slightly tense moment, Franz sighed.

"Fine, I got it. If you're going to go this far, I'm sure you have your reasons."

"Sorry about all this. You're really the only one I can rely on here."

With that, Klaus clapped Franz on the shoulder.

Then, he kept walking out of the room, not turning back even once.

On a fast horse, he should be able to reach the capital from Blume after a full day's ride. With Klaus' lack of physical stamina, though, it should take longer.

But, he had to hurry. He knew that time was of the essence.

Both for Alois, and for Gerda's faction.

111

The daughter of Count Storm, Camilla Storm, is a villain.

A hateful and faithless wench who tried to tear apart the Second Prince Julian and his one true love Liselotte, the daughter of a baron. She was a detestable woman, stubborn as a mule and malicious as a snake. Now, that most dangerous and calamitous of all women still vied for power, even ensnaring a duke in her wiles.

– To think that such a ridiculous thing would end up happening. Has there ever been such a perfect irony before?

He had been taken in by her words. That was the first mistake they made.

She should have been disposed of straight away before she even had the chance to open her mouth.

After all, Camilla Storm *had to be the villain*.

○

“...Gerda has escaped!?”

The uprising had started three days ago.

Alois, who was buried in written reports that piled up on his desk, heard the last thing he had wanted to hear.

The new report said that the residence she was being held at in the capital had been attacked and Gerda had been freed. The senior maid and manservant who had been imprisoned alongside her had also gone missing. It was safe to assume they had gone with whoever had freed them from their captors.

“Didn’t I specifically order the number of guards to be increased!? I said that she would be an obvious target!”

Alois yelled at the servant who had entered his office to deliver the message.

The supposed reason for the rebellion was dissatisfaction with Alois’ rule. In particular, he was said to be unfair in his dealings with the family members of prominent houses.

He had treated Gerda, an elder member of the Lörriich family, as a criminal despite a distinct lack of conclusive evidence. He had also treated a senior maid in his employ, a cousin of the head of the Meyerheim family, in the same way. What’s more, Alois had also dismissed a lot of servants who had been devoted to the Montchat family since his father was the Duke.

But the worst crime of all, it seemed, was his firing of Vilmer, who was the second son of the House of Meyerheim. The Meyerheim family had always insisted on Vilmer being involved in Alois’ administrative affairs, as a way they could influence his policy decisions.

That's why he thought Gerda would be an obvious target, considering she was 'unfairly detained'. Even though the duchy's capital was still loyal to him, he had still insisted on doubling security in the case of an emergency.

"Ah... y-yes, that was c-certainly the case, however..."

Alois noticed how the young attendant trembled after he raised his voice at him. He may have spoken louder than he realized. Taking a deep breath, he made a conscious effort to calm his voice as he called out to him again.

"...Gerda was supposed to be detained in one of the residences in the capital. I specifically ordered a guard set around it, and I hadn't heard any word of an attack in the town, have I? So just how did they spirit Gerda away?"

"Yes... That is... well, it appears to have been an inside job... Several people who worked at the residence have also gone missing since the incident..."

Alois crossed his arms. He didn't answer him back straight away, but he chewed his lip in obvious frustration.

Gerda and Vilmer had been the two senior most servants of the Montchat family. There must be a number of people, even in the capital, that sympathize with them. Despite the news of Gerda attempting to poison Alois being widespread at this point, there are still some who refuse to believe it.

They say that the real culprit had to be Camilla. Camilla had poisoned him, then pinned the blame on Gerda. Ever since Camilla came to Mohnton, Alois had slowly begun to lose his mind. So, perhaps if Camilla was driven out and Gerda was returned to her rightful place, then all this unrest could be fixed? That wasn't a rare opinion, even in the capital.

But, it wasn't one he could ignore. Even though he had expected some form of a backlash, he naively thought that he could find an understanding with those that opposed him. But, in reality, a revolt had risen up across the Duchy and even people in the capital, which was under his direct rule, had begun to suspect Alois.

Good lord or not, he had been made painfully aware just how fragile a reputation that was to sit upon.

In the minds of many of his people, Alois was inferior to Gerda and Vilmer. Thinking about his failure to earn that trust and respect he sorely needed in a situation like this, Alois was disappointed in himself.

Just as Camilla had always said to him, Alois was a man who was insincere, always hiding his feelings in masquerade. He wasn't the sort of person who could move the hearts of others. Even if he let Camilla into his heart, even if he said he wanted to change, it wasn't a thing that could happen overnight. What's more, it's not as if everyone could suddenly see the effort Alois was making either.

It was incredibly frustrating, but there was nothing Alois could do about that now.

"Lord Alois, is there something wrong?"

His attendant spoke out, concerned with just how silent Alois had become.

"You must be tired after all, my Lord? It would be better if you were to take some rest..."

For the past few days, ever since he received word of the rebellion, Alois hadn't slept a wink as he attempted to tackle the issue. He couldn't deny that he was physically and mentally exhausted.

Yet, Alois was still the Duke. Shaking his head, Alois smiled as he tried to reassure him.

"No, it's nothing."

He couldn't allow what he had changed to regress back to the status quo of the past.

The rebels' demands were to restore all those servants he had dismissed, as well as to clear Gerda of any guilt and have her also return to her position. What's more, to hold a trial for the 'true culprit', that being Camilla.

To get straight to the point, what they wanted was to dispose of Camilla and have Alois once again living with Gerda's hands around his throat. Their demands weren't something Alois could even entertain. The messenger whom the rebellion's conspirators had sent to negotiate with him had also been rebuked.

With that bridge being burned, the only thing that could be done was to face it head on. If Alois lost this battle, the one who would be in the most danger was Camilla.

"In any case, about Gerda. They can't have gone far in such a short time. Send out riders to find out where she is. After that, we need to figure out exactly who the missing servants are, then..."

○

Alois worked without pause. He had always been a hardworking person, but these past few days he barely left his office at all.

The reports came in an endless stream, and he was constantly asked for new commands. There was no time to eat or sleep at all. Of course, that naturally meant that he hadn't the time to see Camilla either. The situation being as it was, that was understandable.

– I want to help him.

Was there anything that she could do for Alois' sake? She had been constantly thinking about it.

But, Camilla's wish would be granted in a way she could least expect.

It was the same night that the news of Gerda's escape had broken, as the urgently dispatched messengers of the royal family arrived.

112

After the sun had set, the only thing that lit up the front porch of the Montchat estate was a small manastone lamp.

Without stepping foot inside, the envoys from the royal capital, who had arrived in the middle of the night and called for an audience with Alois, announced the purpose of their visit.

“Return Camilla to the royal capital... you say...?”

Alois looked stunned as he stared at the two envoys.

As if unable to resist the tense atmosphere, some of the servants of the house had gathered to watch. Alois was certain that somewhere in that crowd of onlookers, Camilla had to be there. But, Alois didn't have the time to look over his shoulder to see.

Both entrance doors had been opened in the wake of the envoys. Judging by their uniforms, they seemed to be military attaches to the royal palace. Both of them stood at attention, seemingly not worried about the myriad of eyes that watched them from inside.

“Exactly. This is a royal decree. It would be unthinkable to leave the daughter of Count Storm in Mohnton, when a civil war is brewing and the land could become a battlefield at any moment. We are to escort her back to the capital as soon as possible.”

With that, the other envoy held out a letter to Alois. After receiving it, Alois quickly untied the string that bound the paper and unrolled it.

The letter unmistakably bore the royal seal. The letters were written in a hasty cursive. At the bottom of the letter, a signature in red ink. Just as the messenger had said, the letter was a decree for Camilla to return to the royal capital.

“...The handwriting is wrong.”

He had received letters from the King several times in the past. He couldn't deny that the quality of the paper, the stamped seal and even the colour of string that tied the letter in a roll were what he had come to expect of royal decrees

However, he hadn't seen this handwriting before.

“Even though this bears the King's emblem, this was not written by his hand. Why is that?”

“It was His Highness, Prince Julian who penned this letter. His Majesty is currently bedridden, so the Second Prince sent out this order in his stead.”

“Bedridden? This is the first I've heard of it.”

Alois looked up from the letter. He often received letters and reports from the royal capital, but this was the first he had heard of the King being ill. But even if the King had recently taken very ill, could it really be possible for Prince Julian to have enough power to send royal decrees already?

“In the first place, what of the First Prince, His Highness Prince Eckhart? If anyone were to substitute for His Majesty, surely it would be the heir apparent?”

Eckhart, the firstborn prince, was the first in line for the throne. Even if the King was unable to rise from bed, there was no reason for the Second Prince, Julian, to take the reins of power.

But, the messenger didn’t answer that question. Standing tall, he palmed away Alois’ inquiry.

“That is a confidential matter, not something to be discussed in such a place. The fact that this decree represents His Majesty the King’s will is unalterable, however.”

A decree bearing the mark of the King was as good as receiving the King’s order in person. Even though they were a branch family of the royal house, a decree from the King was an immutable command for the Montchat family. He couldn’t go against it.

That being said, Alois wasn’t so eager to meekly accept the King’s – or rather, Prince Julian’s – command so easily.

“...He had her exiled, why is it that he’s demanding her return now?”

The person who had exiled Camilla in the first place and the one who was pressuring Alois for her return now were one and the same; Prince Julian. He was called the ‘Toad of the Swamp’, whom no one would ever want to marry, therefore Prince Julian set Camilla up as his marriage candidate. There was no way that Prince Julian had held any empathy towards Camilla.

So, just why was he suddenly wanting her to return now? Was it truly possible that he had suddenly felt a pang of remorse for what he had done?

But, that wasn’t the only reason he had to doubt what he was being told.

“What’s more... just why is it that you’re so keenly aware of Mohnton’s current situation?”

It would take at least five days to travel by carriage from the capital city of Sonnenlicht in the south to the northern Duchy of Mohnton. Even on a swift horse, the journey would take at least 3 days and nights. The revolt had only been declared three days ago. It was impossible for that news to have already been reported to Prince Julian, who resided in the capital.

Then, just how could Prince Julian’s envoys know of such a thing?

“...It was the Ende family, wasn’t it?”

Liselotte was betrothed to Prince Julian. Liselotte Ende. The daughter of Baron Ende, one of the rebellion’s ringleaders.

“Liselotte Ende... So she coaxed His Highness into this...!”

“Duke Montchat, I would remind you to watch your tongue.”

“Have the Ende family been whispering in His Highness’ ear since the beginning? His Highness must have known that this rebellion would occur, but instead of intervening or mediating, all he’s done is call for Camilla to be returned. This is clearly the Ende family’s doing!”

“The *civil war* taking place is all due to your own mishandling of this land. This royal decree is intended merely to save the life of the daughter of Count Storm, who so unfortunately got caught up in all this. Would you truly rebuke this royal display of benevolence?”

The envoy regarded Alois with a cold gaze.

To go against a King’s decree was the same as being in open conflict with the royal family. At the very least, if the order was something absurd or cruel, it would be understandable to at least petition for it to be rescinded or to tarry in carrying it out.

But, Alois couldn’t in good conscience follow through with this order, when it was so obviously a manipulation from the Ende family. There were far too many points of suspicion to consider it a benevolent decree on face value as well.

The two envoys exchanged glances as Alois couldn’t bring himself to answer. Would he give up Camilla? Or make an enemy of the crown?

The one who broke that terse silence was Camilla herself.

“...So be it. Shouldn’t I just go along with them?”

After making up her mind, Camilla stepped out from the ring of servants that surrounded the scene.

Nicole, who stood by her side, looked up at Camilla anxiously. After returning Nicole’s gaze with a reassuring glance, she turned to look at the two envoys.

“Camilla...”

Camilla looked at Alois, whose brow was furrowed in frustration.

“Returning to the royal capital isn’t something to agonize over.”

“They’ve set a trap there for you.”

“Then, it will be just like the old days.”

Camilla left her hands on her hips as she puffed out her chest. From the beginning, she had never been good at avoiding the traps that had been set for her. Sometimes she just pushed straight through them, and other times she would plot her revenge after the fact.

“They’ll probably want to make you a hostage. I can’t promise you’ll be safe there.”

“And if you make an enemy of the King, won’t things become even more difficult for you, Lord Alois?”

Seeing how troubled Alois looked, Camilla frowned.

Prince Julian suddenly issuing a decree for her return. Even though Camilla was honest to a fault, not even she could believe something like that so easily. There was definitely something malicious behind the order.

She couldn't imagine exactly what it was. It was scary to think about and she truly didn't want to find out. It was only for Alois' sake that she stepped forward at all.

She wanted to help him. She wanted to support him in any way she could.

It was the way she had once felt towards Prince Julian.

She wasn't quite as fiery and passionate in how she held that feeling as she had done in the past... but, the embers of those same emotions surely burned in Camilla's heart for Alois now.

"Lord Alois, I will be fine. Because I... I believe in you."

Hearing Camilla's words, Alois could only blink in surprise.

Then, he drew his trembling lips tight. Sending a strong gaze back her way, he looked into Camilla's eyes.

"...I'll be sure to pick you up soon."

Because of the looming crisis breaking out in Mohnton, Camilla Storm was to return to the royal capital. Once that issue had been dealt with, there was no reason for Camilla to remain there any longer.

That's why Alois' words were a hint that he would put down this revolt as soon as he could.

Seeing those sincere red eyes looking her way, Camilla smiled slightly.

When she first arrived in this land, she had pined to return to the capital day and night. Now, she truly loathed the idea of leaving this place behind.

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Immediately after Camilla left with the envoys, Klaus galloped into the duchy's capital.

Without even giving Camilla time to prepare, they insisted she leave with them straight away. Arriving at the mansion almost as if he and Camilla had been swapped, amongst the throng of depressed looking servants, Klaus immediately spied Alois in particular.

Even though there were so many people around, the mansion had a strange aura of sullen silence blanketing it. Everyone's faces looked melancholic. They spoke in hushed tones, their voices tinged with despair. 'The Montchat family is facing ruin, even the royal family has become their enemies,' they would say.

Klaus used his imagination to fill in the gaps of what he had missed. He was too late. Camilla wasn't here anymore, and he'd be willing to bet that Gerda wasn't in town anymore either.

"Oi, oi, Klaus!? The hell are you doing here...!?"

The first one to finally speak out to him as he stood in the entrance hall was Günter, his former boss. That rugged face of his was full of some barely contained passion, as he looked at Klaus as if he was hallucinating.

Well, that was only natural. Klaus was a member of the Lörriich family, after all. The same Lörriich family that was in open rebellion against Duke Alois, alongside the houses of Meyerheim and Ende.

The eyes of the people who turned to look at Klaus as he entered the hall were not warm. But, more than suspicion, rather they looked bewildered by his sudden appearance.

"Just what did you come here to do- no, wait a sec. You... what in the blazes happened to your face?"

"What? Did I become even more handsome?"

Günter looked astonished as Klaus flashed a fearsome smile, despite the scar running down the left side of his face.

After leaving Günter, who was stunned into silence, Klaus approached Alois.

Alois' fringe hung low over his eyes, casting a dark shadow across his face. He could barely see those red eyes of his, slowly blinking as he stared at the ground. His hand was over his mouth, and it almost seemed as if he were hyperventilating.

"Oi, Alois."

He looked totally depressed. No, rather, that doesn't even cover the scope of it, does it? Klaus found it hard to imagine just what kind of torment Alois' heart must be going through, considering how badly it was torn apart like this every time he tried to take a step forward. He struggled to even find the words to say.

"Alois, this isn't the time to give up. It isn't over yet. Camilla is still-"

"...I know that."

Alois answered, but didn't raise his head. Klaus was surprised by how calm his voice was.

"She was taken back south for 'protection' by royal decree. It sounds reasonable on paper."

Abusing royal prerogative like that, the Ende family could order whatever they wished. They didn't even need a pretext like that to take Camilla away if they so pleased. If they didn't care about indignation or criticism, they could wield the power of the state like a cudgel.

Yet, despite that, they still prepared such a pretext. It was a hard thing for Alois to refuse, and to anyone who heard about it, it would seem like an example of royal benevolence.

Then, why? The answer was that they desired to retain legitimacy. They still felt the need to proceed as though they were in accordance with the 'law'. To present a supposedly logical case in a seemingly upright way, that was how they would maintain their image.

Therefore, Camilla should still be safe from harm, for now. The decree bearing the seal of the King still remained with Alois. If anything untoward should happen to Camilla before he returns to the capital, that decree could be wielded like a weapon against the royal family.

"Whilst our enemies remain quiet, we still have time. Therefore, I won't give up."

Alois spat those words out as he stood up. Despite how calm they seemed, those eyes of his were lit up with a quiet passion as he looked at the members of the household who had gathered in the entry hall.

Klaus felt himself hold his breath. His gaze was transfixed. The words of comfort he was trying to say died on his tongue.

"I'm a fool. I've let Gerda escape, been betrayed by my vassals, and even had the most important person in my life taken away from me. I don't have the strength nor the wisdom to turn such a disaster around. I'm sure that everything that's happened because of me has put you all through no shortage of stress either."

Contrary to how defeatist his words seemed, Alois' voice resounded strongly. Puffing out his chest, he stood tall, letting his eyes affirm his feelings.

"We're still in a bad situation. But, even so, I will never give in. As long as she waits for me... so long as she still believes in me."

When the rebellion broke out, a number of people had fled from the mansion. Many of them were people related to the Meyerheim and Ende families. Alois, although kind, also seemed to be a naïve sort of Lord. Was he truly a man that could be relied upon to rise to the occasion when a crisis loomed?

Some of those in front of him must have held those doubts as well, as Alois looked at each and every one of them.

"I want you all to lend me your power. For the sake of me becoming the true Lord of Mohnton."

His face looked both undaunted by the situation and sincere in his words. That white hair, the pride of his lineage, swayed gently in the cool night air. He looked like a man who believed he could achieve anything, no matter how little power he truly possessed. A brave and honest fool, laying his soul bare.

Those eyes of his twinkled like the sun, even in the dim light.

Alois didn't need anyone to comfort him. Instead, it was the people who found comfort in him, as they were captivated.

Standing behind Alois, Klaus frowned.

Klaus was undeniably someone who could think circles around Alois. He was the type that could master almost any skill he set his mind to. What's more, he had always possessed much more charisma than he ever had.

But, no matter what, Klaus somehow knew for sure that he would never surpass Alois again after this night. He wished to do everything he could for that man. He also realized that in making that wish come true, Klaus had been defeated.

"Honestly... don't be surprised if I come to hate you again."

As Klaus said that with a self-derisive laugh, Alois turned around. There was something about the way he looked confused at Klaus' laugh that only made him angrier.

"Give me a look at the map. Just what is the situation? How many soldiers have deserted? You're a pacifist, so you probably don't know a polearm from a gambeson."

Alois blinked in surprise. Then, trying to maintain his composure, he spoke.

"The House of Lörriich are helping to lead the rebellion. Are you really okay with fighting against Rudolph?"

"Yeah. In fact, I've already gone ahead and robbed him of the Lörriich family. It's all mine now."

With a 'hmpf', Klaus snorted derisively. Besides, it wasn't as if the Lörriich family could have ever truly fought against Alois. It relied on Blume as its power base, after all.

"There's no way the people of Blume could turn a blade against you. You helped set up that whole stupid festival for them, and now you're supposed to kill each other? Don't make me laugh!"

The people of Blume had sung and laughed with Alois and Camilla, dancing arm in arm. With those memories still fresh in their minds, it was impossible to think they could suddenly become enemies.

Klaus felt the same way. His own insecurities. His relationship with his conflicted brother. The only reason he could solve those two dark clouds hanging over his life was because of Alois and Camilla.

He knew just how dire a situation they found themselves in. But, if this guy managed to save him from his own foolishness, it only felt right that he return the favour.

"I've got your back! I, Klaus Lörriich, in the name of both the House of Lörriich and the town of Blume, swear myself to you, Alois!"

"Klaus..."

Alois' words trailed off, suddenly swallowed up by another loud shout.

"Me too! I'll always be on yer side, young master!"

It was Günter. Yelling that out even louder than Klaus did, he rushed over to Alois.

“Even though we Brandts have always lived like criminals, you dragged us back out into the light. Young mas... no, Lord Alois. I can’t swear any kind of noble house to ya like that guy can, but I can at least guarantee you these arms of mine.”

Looking at Alois, Günter slapped those skilled arms of his that had produced so many delicacies with a grin. Ever since Alois had first become a lord, Günter had always been his ally. No matter how bad things got, that had never changed.

“I know who you are, and what you’ve been through. We all believe in you, Lord Alois. If I open up a new restaurant, I don’t want it to be in a boring land where you can’t even hum a tune without someone lookin’ at ya funny! So, my strength is all yours, Lord Alois!”

“Günter...”

Following Günter’s words, all the chefs raised up their voices in support. It wasn’t just for Alois’ sake. They already considered Camilla an irreplaceable part of their kitchen.

“Lord Alois... Me too, I won’t run away.”

He heard a voice from beyond the throng of people surrounding him. As he looked, Alois saw Nicole standing on the steps leading up to the first floor, staring down at him. Nicole’s face was pale, but as she clenched her fist, she spoke as loudly as she could through her trembling voice.

“I’m the Mistress’ personal maid. So, we have to bring her back, no matter what...!”

“Nicole.”

One after another, people spoke out around him.

Not everyone fully believed in Alois. But, they still trusted Alois as their Lord, and even that small trust could one day blossom into belief.

“...Thank you.”

So, there was no way Alois could back down.

After all, it was a Lord’s duty to repay the trust of his people.

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“...Alois, later, do you have a moment?”

As people began to disappear back into the depths of the mansion, Klaus stopped Alois before he walked back up the stairs.

When Alois looked back at him, his face was pale. That was only natural. He had been betrayed and backed into a corner by the people who should have been his vassals, and now they’ve even taken away Camilla, who was the one who could emotionally support him the best.

It would have been strange for him to look healthy at all. One could almost forgive him if he chose to throw everything away and give in to his heartbreak.

Perhaps that’s what he really wanted to do, and everything he did before was just putting on a brave face.

“I don’t mind but... what is it?”

As he tried to collect himself, Alois responded to Klaus. Klaus, meanwhile, found himself slightly at a loss when faced with that expression of his, as if he were trying to mask his exhaustion.

“I just need a second, there’s something we have to talk about.”

Klaus swallowed hard, managing to force his lips to move the way he wanted them to.

Could he really tell Alois? Just how would Alois react to his words?

If Alois heard Klaus’ story, he was willing to bet that he would go to the capital straight away. The royal capital, the city to which Camilla was on her way. He really hadn’t wanted to let her go. And if he knew, chances are he would chase after Camilla immediately, without any hesitation.

But, there was no way Alois could leave this place right now. If he turned his back on such a crisis now, all those people who pledged their support to him, who believed in him, would be scattered like dust to the wind. There was no way that a Lord who seemingly ran from the land he was dutybound to protect could ever claim legitimacy to rule it.

– No.

He had to believe in him. Alois wouldn’t act rashly, he knew what he had to do.

“It concerns you. It’s not something we can talk about just standing around, though. Sorry about this, but it’s important.”

As Klaus spoke so mysteriously with such a serious face, Alois’ eyebrows furrowed.

But, before Alois could say anything, there was suddenly a panicked rushing of footsteps up through the entrance.

“Report! The Ende magicians have begun to attack from Falsch! Battle has been joined, but without a way to respond to their magic...”

One of the guard captains in charge of the capital of Mohnton's defense shouted out. Alois tore his gaze away from Klaus to look at the man as he delivered his report.

"Klaus, that story will have to wait... What kind of magic are they using? Give me a damage report."

Alois quickly walked over to the soldier. Staring at Alois' back as he left him, Klaus clicked his tongue in frustration.

They would definitely find the time to speak later. But, for now, this was the more pressing issue. Taking a deep breath, Klaus cleared his mind for the problem at hand.

For now, he had to act as the strategist for the Montchat family.

○

Five days after leaving Mohnton.

Camilla's arrival in the royal capital was a plain affair.

During the trip, she had been worried she would simply be killed and left by the roadside, but it seems like that had been an empty concern. The envoys from the capital had merely escorted her back to the royal capital, and all the way to the gates of the Storm family mansion.

It looked just the same as it had the last time Camilla had seen it. The garden had bloomed beautifully with the onset of spring, full of flowers that wouldn't survive the humid swamps of Mohnton, gently swaying in the breeze. There weren't many servants bustling about. The ones that were around averted their eyes as Camilla walked past as if they were afraid of her.

Once they reached the parlour of the mansion, the envoys departed her company as they came face to face with the Count and Countess Storm – that is to say, Camilla's parents. After exchanging rote pleasantries and the necessary documents, the two that had delivered her to the capital had finished their work. After a quick bow to the Count and his wife, they left without another word.

The only ones left in the room were Camilla and her parents.

The sky outside was a vivid bright blue. Wispy white clouds ran across it, as birds floated by on the wing. The busy thoroughfares of the capital that she could see from the window were full of hustle and bustle, with wreaths of decorative flowers being put up everywhere.

Perhaps the procession for Prince Julian and Liselotte's marriage would pass through those streets. The city was bursting with joy, awaiting that wondrous day.

However, if anything could cast a dark shadow on that momentous occasion, it would be the return of Camilla to the capital.

And, in stark contrast to the buoyant scene outside, the faces of her mother and father were grim. The way they looked at Camilla was nothing even close to the faces of parents who had missed their daughter.

“Camilla... you... just what have you...!?”

Her father Patrick Storm’s voice shook with rage as he finally spoke. That face that was usually so mild-mannered and flattering in public was now twisted in bitter anger. Perhaps things had been truly hard on him this past year? Although she remembered his hair being just as black as his when she had left, Camilla could see strands of white streaking through it now.

“What have you done... just why did you do such a thing...!?”

Next to her, Camilla’s mother Katarina’s eyes were cast down to the ground. Her face was so pale and devoid of colour, it was as if she were the one being accused of a crime.

It was obvious that she wasn’t welcome from the moment she stepped foot back in this mansion, but to go this far?

“Did we really ever treat you so poorly!? Why would you go so far to betray us!?”

“...What do you mean, betray?”

“We loved you with all we had. You never lacked for anything, we let you get away with all sorts of selfishness, and we did our best to teach you right from wrong. But, once again, you’ve betrayed our expectations in you!”

Patrick gripped his hands into tight fists as he bit his lip. Through all the pain, frustration and sorrow in his voice, it was the obvious disappointment that truly struck like a dagger at the child in Camilla’s heart.

“Because of the grace of His Highness, you were given the opportunity to have a fresh start in Mohnton. But, even that wasn’t enough to teach you some measure of remorse. You spat on His Highness’ mercy and disregarded our feelings, and now you’ve...”

Patrick ran out of breath, panting in exasperation. Then, spat out his final words angrily.

“And now, you’ve misled the Duke Montchat and caused a general revolt in Mohnton.”

“I have never done anything of the sort!”

“You’re still going to lie even now!? There is a witness!”

“Who is the witness!? I am not lying!”

“How unsightly! Just why is it that you’ve never been able to honestly apologize for your wrongs, even back when you were just a girl!?”

– Why...?

Camilla frowned in frustration.

Just why would they not believe Camilla’s words? Their own daughter’s words?

It had always been like this. When it came to fights between Camilla and Therese, they had always taken her side. When they saw the brash Camilla and her crying cousin, they would always side with the girl who shed tears.

Because there are other people who have it so much harder, because she had all that you could ever need here, because she was so blessed. So, she wasn't ever allowed to cry herself – that's what her mother and father had said, as they locked Camilla's tears away.

"We have given you a life full of anything you could ever want. But just why did you become such a person!? Why are you so intent on betraying our love for you!?"

"That's enough! Darling, that's enough already!!"

Katarina leaned into Patrick's chest, weeping as she cried out. Patrick pulled Katarina into an embrace as if to protect her. Then, taking a deep breath, he tried to regain his calm.

"...In three days' time, a trial will be held for you. Until then... you have been permitted to spend your last days here with your family, as a final mercy."

There had definitely been a sense of foreboding.

During the journey, the envoys who took Camilla to the capital kept a cold distance that wouldn't befit escorts... but something closer to captors.

"Take this time to reflect, Camilla. Then, you can spend your final days peacefully together here with your family, just the *four of us*. Please... don't cause your parents any more pain."

Patrick said that quietly, between Katarina's sobs.

Camilla bit back the words she wanted to shout out, grinding her teeth. Despite having spent a year away from the royal capital, her parents were just the same as the day she had left this place.

Whether it be now, or all the times in the past, they never believed a word Camilla had to say.

Camilla's parents were, by all accounts, good people.

They were well educated and came from a good lineage. They were crafty, but not malicious, and truly believed in human kindness. Even if they admitted that there was evil in the world, they never believed that it would truly point its wicked barbs at them. So long as they saw no evil, heard no evil or spoke no evil, then evil would not visit itself upon them.

The running of Count Storm's fief, in the southeastern corner of the Kingdom, was left to his retainers. Taking up residence in the capital, the shipping businesses that he had started as a hobby had eventually turned into a thriving asset for the family. He was well liked by the people around him because of his wealth of kindness and, alongside his healthy and astute wife, he had deep relationships with others in high society. Because of the scandal that emerged surrounding their only daughter, the other noble families were sympathetic to the Count and his wife. Helped by those kind nobles, they managed to survive the year without falling into hardship.

They never even felt the anguish of losing their daughter. Thanks to the adorable girl that came to take Camilla's place.

Good things come to good people. Damnation shall always befall those who beget it.

Swindlers were low, but to be a common fool sucked in by their tricks was to be even lower. Because of that, they were adamant that they would never be deceived – those were the kind of people they were.

○

“Camilla, you idiot! Why the hell did you come back!?”

Camilla's old bedroom had been given to Therese now, so she had been told to stay in one of the guest rooms.

As soon as she entered that room, Camilla was buffeted by that angry shout.

You could be forgiven for not believing that this was a scarcely used guest room. The bed sheets were brand new, there were fresh flowers on the windowsill and there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen. Camilla felt a wave of nostalgia as she saw the racks of clothes and her favourite chair, looking just like they had the day she had left the capital.

“Did you seriously have no idea what was going to happen!? You shouldn't have ever returned!!”

But, despite the shouts, that voice made Camilla feel relieved.

Standing opposite her in the room, her face scrunched up in an angry frown, was Camilla's bad mannered maid. She had taught Camilla how to cook and sneak out to go to the orphanage together

with her, and when she was to be exiled from the capital, she had begged to be allowed to go with her. She was the closest thing Camilla ever had to a sister, perhaps.

“Diana.”

As soon as she called out her name, Diana sprinted towards her. Without giving Camilla a moment to react, she drew her into a strong hug.

“You know, you really are stupid! You should have just laid low back in the swamps! You should have known this was all a trap!”

“I knew.”

Wrapping her arms around Diana’s back, Camilla spoke softly. That tender and warm hug Diana gave her made her want to cry. But, because of the curse ingrained into her by her parents, she bit her lip and held back the tears.

Shutting her eyes tight, Camilla breathed out. She couldn’t cry. No matter what happens from now on, she wouldn’t have any regrets. She had already come to terms with that.

“I knew, but I still came back.”

“...I guess you still can’t help but be a fool sometimes?”

Her face streaked with tears, Diana sighed in exasperation.

“Mohnton was... it was right for you in the end, wasn’t it? It was right...”

Diana did her best to smile through her tears as she stroked Camilla’s hair. As her gentle hand passed over her ear, it tickled. Just a little bit.

○

After unpacking her luggage and changing out of her travelling dress, Diana began to comb and braid Camilla’s hair like she used to. Her skilled hands didn’t pull at a single knot or leave a single tangle in Camilla’s hair. It was a big difference to Nicole, who she always ended up snapping at.

– Nicole, are you alright...?

Despite that, she still missed that clumsy maid of hers. Realizing how downcast she must have suddenly looked, Camilla raised her face quickly.

When she raised her head, she saw the view outside the window. The sky was still bright outside, lighting up the sprawling cityscape. The town was awash in flowers, as sure a sign as any that Liselotte and Julian were soon to be wed.

“You’re being used to boost Prince Julian’s popularity.”

Diana spoke in a voice barely louder than a whisper as she ran the comb gently through Camilla’s hair.

She felt a slight throb in her chest when she heard Prince Julian's name. Even if she had decided to give up on him, he was still the person that she had loved for more than half her life. She had loved him with everything she had, but he had never returned those feelings of hers, and now he actively sought to cast her down.

"That's why I told you to stop going after him. I always thought he was a snake of a man. I never thought you could be happy with someone like that."

Camilla bit her lip at her words, but Diana didn't care. She was the same now as she had been for a long time, never caring to bite her tongue for the sake of others. A bad habit that had well and truly rubbed off on Camilla.

"Hey, about the current situation in the capital, have you heard about it? They say that His Majesty has fallen sick, and they say a war of succession might be brewing."

"...War of succession?"

Camilla frowned at those words, since she hadn't heard anything like that at all.

The heir apparent to the throne should have been set in stone a long time ago. Prince Eckhart was the Crown Prince, other than him no one should be in line for succession. Although Prince Julian was certainly the son of the king, he was the Second Prince, born to the Second Queen, thus not considered a serious contender for the throne compared to his brother. There shouldn't even be a trace of him in a conflict for the throne.

"Prince Julian has become exceptionally popular amongst the people. I hate it, but I can't deny that people are always talking about him. Prince Eckhart is too rigid, people aren't really that fond of him."

"...You're right."

From what Camilla had seen of Eckhart, he was an excellent and handsome Prince, but he was also dour and humourless. When Prince Julian sought to banish Camilla and marry Liselotte instead, it was Eckhart who was adamantly against it until the very end. But, the way the world saw it, he was too rooted in custom and pragmatism, not in tune with things like fated love and a good story.

In order to become the King of a nation, it was necessary to win the hearts and minds of the people. In that respect, the chasm between the all-too-serious Eckhart and Julian, whose love story with Liselotte was still an incredibly popular tale, was vast.

"His Highness plans to humiliate you in public, marry Liselotte and then ride a wave of popular support. Apparently His Majesty's condition is only getting worse, so something really might happen soon, huh?"

"His Majesty is truly so ill?"

"I've only heard the rumours going around, but apparently it's really serious. There's even a story about someone seeing the reaper himself lurking over His Majesty's shoulder. That's just a tall tale though, obviously. But it seems like those sorts of stories are popular, like that old rumour of the ghost haunting the royal palace."

With that, Diana clapped Camilla on the shoulders.

“Alright, done! Make sure to keep up your keen, Camilla.”

Until the day of the trial, Camilla was forbidden to leave the mansion. That’s what her parents had told her. But, the way Diana talked to her, it was like she was daring her to go on another escapade into town, just like the old days.

Running a final hand through her hair, Diana turned Camilla around to face her with a sharp expression.

“Listen, Therese will be back in the evening. That evil little lout, she hasn’t changed at all. Don’t you dare lose to her!”

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If she thought back, Camilla could remember a time when, as a young girl, she and Therese were very close.

Therese's father, Viscount Neumann and Camilla's father, Count Patrick Storm, were very close as brothers. The Count often invited his brother to visit him.

And whenever the Viscount and his wife would visit, Therese would always be with them. Back then, Therese was fascinated with Camilla and always followed her around, whilst Camilla loved her like she would a younger sister. Whenever it was time to go home, she would cling to Camilla, not wanting to leave.

But, when Camilla was around seven or eight years old, something started to change in their relationship. Camilla herself had no idea why it happened.

Therese kept visiting the mansion as per usual, and left in the usual way. The first difference was that her tantrums at not wanting to go home got worse and worse. She began to refuse to leave more and more, essentially having to be half dragged out by an apologetic looking Viscount and his wife.

Then, it was as if she suddenly came to despise her. After that, Camilla never felt anything but hatred from Therese.

At the time, Camilla had absolutely no idea what could have possibly caused Therese's wild change in behaviour towards her.

But, she had been deeply hurt by it at the time. That was the truth.

○

Black hair, just like Camilla's.

A face that resembled Camilla's as well. But, whereas Camilla's expression always felt sharp, Therese's was much softer.

When she smiled, it was like a blooming flower. When she cast her eyes down, it made others want to protect her. In the afternoon, Therese returned to the Storm mansion, where she was beloved by all.

"Welcome home, Therese. How was tea with Miss Liselotte today?"

"Thank you for welcoming me back, father. I had a lot of fun. We discussed a lot of things as well."

"I take it Liselotte hasn't changed much, Therese?"

"That's right, mother. She hasn't changed. She's still deeply happy to be getting married at last. Miss Liselotte also asked me to convey her greetings to you as well mother, father."

Camilla's mother and father greeted Therese in the entrance hall after she arrived.

She looked tired, but still gave them a natural looking smile all the same. Looking at them from afar, they looked like a perfectly normal and happy family.

Camilla, meanwhile, who was supposed to be the true daughter of this house, frowned as she watched from a distance.

She'd heard that Therese had returned and decided to come and see, but she was already regretting that decision.

It was as if Camilla had been nothing to the House of Storm. They had simply replaced their daughter with another, and life continued unaffected by her absence. Whether it was Camilla or Therese, it made no great difference to those parents.

– No.

Those parents of hers, who doted on Therese, were much more gentle and kind with her than they ever had been with Camilla. Therese, a girl adored and loved by many, was a far more suitable future lady of House Storm than their true daughter, a problem child with an awful reputation.

Camilla averted her eyes, clenching her fists. She didn't want to watch anymore.

– ...Time to go back.

She wanted to leave, before anyone noticed her. That's what Camilla hoped to do, but Therese trampled on that thought with almost perfect timing.

"Father, mother, did anything happen whilst I was away?"

Therese's high pitched voice echoed through the entrance hall.

"I can see someone over there, but I cannot quite make out their face... May I ask who that is?"

Therese raised her voice, her high tone mixed with a note of confusion. Her gaze was fixed straight on Camilla, who had been watching from afar. After squinting, she turned to her mother and father, a strangely joyful smile on her face.

"Perhaps it's *a guest*?"

She didn't betray anything in her tone. But, Camilla understood the malice in those words straight away.

She had taken a step towards her room, but she immediately turned on her heel. She saw red.

Before she even had time to think about it, Camilla heard herself speak.

"...This is my home."

Stepping out of the shadows, she glared at Therese.

"What is your problem with me? Asking me who I am? How utterly shameless!"

"Shameless...? No, I... I didn't mean to do that..."

Flanked by her parents, Therese shrank away, as if she were intimidated by Camilla's pressure. Katarina put a hand on Therese's shoulder as support.

It was a scene she had seen many times before. Camilla's parents, who believed themselves to be allies of justice, were always looking to protect the weak. They always took the meek Therese's side against the brash Camilla.

"I'm sorry, sister. I truly didn't think that it could have been my sister listening in on us. Like some sort of criminal... no."

As Katarina pulled her closer, Therese smiled suddenly.

"You really are a criminal, aren't you? I'm sorry, I wasn't really thinking straight."

"Criminal, you say?"

Taking a step forward, Camilla's voice rumbled angrily.

"How dare... how dare you say that!? If I am a criminal, then what does that make you!? Whilst I wasn't here, because of you, everything has..."

– Everything has...

Her voice trembled. As her shoulders shook in anger, a group of passing servants looked stared at her. Perhaps, some of them looked at Camilla with a slight amount of pity in their eyes. But, most of them looked at her with harsh, accusing glares.

When Camilla was gone, Therese became the daughter of the House of Storm. Therese had also taken Camilla's room, and Camilla had never been close with most of the servants. In short, the people in the mansion felt that Therese was an integral part of it.

Whereas now, Camilla was the outsider.

"Are you not a shameless thief!? You've been stealing everything of mine!"

Bet it her favourite toys, or a servant that was sympathetic to her. Her father, her mother, her friends. Everything that Camilla held dear, Therese had never hesitated to take for herself.

"Give me back my home! Give me back my family!!"

But, it was always Camilla who was made out to be the villain, bullying those weaker than her. Always. Always, and forever.

"Give it back...? Then, you don't see me as family...?"

Therese's eyes trailed sadly to the floor, as Patrick stepped forward in her place.

There was a sense of justice burning in Patrick's eyes. He had to protect the weak. That daughter of his, who lashed out so rashly and unfairly, had to be chastised. That was the only thing he could do, as a good person.

As Patrick stood in front of Therese, Camilla could only imagine the sort of grin she'd give if no one was watching. But Patrick and Katarina would never suspect those intentions, being the honest sort they were.

"Stop that at once, Camilla."

Patrick spoke sharply.

"Therese is just as much a part of our family as you are. When you were exiled, you have no idea just how much Therese did for the good of our house."

Camilla looked up to glare at her father. As father and daughter, they had exchanged many harsh gazes like this before. To him, Camilla's attitude had always been selfish. He had hoped that by chastising and scolding her, he could somehow reform her behaviour.

"After I lost credibility because of your selfish actions, it was Therese who helped me regain connections. Thanks to Therese, as well as her friend Liselotte, the House of Storm can live peacefully, without facing anger. Therefore..."

"Liselotte?"

Camilla's browed furrowed even deeper as she cut off Patrick's words.

"Why is Therese now friends with Liselotte?"

– Therese should know better than anyone that she was the woman who framed me.

Camilla held those words in check. Thinking harder, it was obvious why the two of them had a strong relationship now.

Therese and Liselotte were both very similar people. It was only natural that two people openly hostile to Camilla would find common ground as her enemy.

"It was just over a year ago that I began to grow close with Miss Liselotte."

As Patrick stood in front of her as if to defend her, Therese's voice was faint as she answered.

"She gave me the opportunity to talk to her about you, sister, and we kept seeing one another. I know that you're still deeply jealous of Miss Liselotte, dear sister, but I beg you not to harbour a grudge against her. Because she's the one that did her best to protect you."

"Protect me? Just how can you stand there and tell such an outrageous lie!?"

As Camilla took an angry step forward, Therese trembled. As if she were terrified, she shrunk back, hugging her body with shaking hands. To any onlooker, Therese must have looked like a petrified baby animal, something you'd desperately want to shield and protect. After looking to Katarina for reassurance, she turned to keep talking to Camilla.

"It's the truth. Please don't be angry, sister. The only one who is at fault here is me. Because I couldn't bear the weight of my sister's *crimes* anymore, I had to *confess* to Miss Liselotte..."

"What did you just say..."

“I told Miss Liselotte that the truth, that the noblewomen who harassed her were all your friends, that you were the one who started that awful rumour about her, and that you had hired those thugs to attack her on the road. That’s how His Highness heard about all of it.”

When Prince Julian heard about what Therese had said from Liselotte, he was consumed by rage. But, at the time, it was Liselotte who had stopped Prince Julian from immediately taking up a sword to cut Camilla down himself. The only thing that stopped him was Liselotte’s persuasion that killing Camilla would only make him just as bad as her, and eventually, the Prince had calmed down.

“It was also Miss Liselotte’s idea that you should marry the Duke Montchat. Isn’t marrying a Toad of the Swamp better than dying? No matter how ugly, gloomy and hateable they may be... So, please don’t be angry with Miss Liselotte, since she was the one who saved you.”

Camilla blinked. She needed a moment to fully process the words Therese had just said.

– In short...

In short, everything...

“...was your fault, the entire time?”

When Camilla had been exiled from the royal capital, all the crimes she could barely remember committing, all the crimes that were grossly exaggerated and all the crimes that were utterly fabricated, all of them were backed with evidence she couldn’t refute. It seemed like everything Camilla had ever said or done was proof that she was both complicit in and masterminding the harassment of Liselotte.

Thinking back now, it truly was strange. Just who could have known Camilla’s private life in such detail? There had to have been something off.

“You sold me out?”

Camilla’s voice grew soft. But, under the surface, she could feel her blood beginning to boil.

She could feel a small trickle of blood run over her knuckles as her clenched fist dug into her palm, and the heat began to rise to her head. She was shocked, furious... and hurt.

Since they were cousins, she had at least believed that, deep down, she would still remember the friendship they’d had as children. But, that was now shattered as just a delusional happy fantasy.

“Selling you out, you say...? I’m sorry... I just couldn’t bear to see my sister commit any more crimes...”

Therese sobbed between words. But, in reality, Camilla knew about the malicious grin she was trying to suppress.

“Crimes...”

The words hanging off her lips, Camilla once again approached Therese. It was just so ridiculous that she wanted to laugh herself.

“Just how much gall do you have, to lie so easily?”

The only sound that echoed through the silent entry hall was Therese's quiet sobs and Camilla's footsteps. Everyone watching held their breath. Those parents stood in front of Therese to protect her. It would have been a laughable scene if it weren't so tragic.

Despite her tears, Camilla knew that she was happy under the surface. Because everything had gone according to her wishes, hadn't it?

"Are you satisfied now, having robbed me of my life? Are you happy, seeing me suffer like this?"

"No. No, I'm not happy. Because, I *still want to save you, sister.*"

"Save... just how can you even say that!?"

As she watched Camilla stepping towards her, Therese raised a hand to her lips. The words that spilled from her lips could barely be heard.

"How can I..."

The sound of her voice was quiet, as she tried to cover up her smile. It was far too fun, after all, so it couldn't be helped.

"Today, I went to a tea party with beg Miss Liselotte. 'Please, help my sister', I said. 'No matter how wicked, nasty and forlorn of any remorse she might be. Because she's my beloved sister, my only one in the world'."

"I am not your sister!"

"No, sister. You are my only big sister Camilla. We're sisters, and we're family. And families exist to help one another. I'm different from you, sister, because I haven't forgotten that."

"Be quiet!"

Stopping in front of Therese, Camilla reached out to grab her. But, before she could, Katarina pulled Therese away, shielding her from Camilla. Just like a real mother and daughter.

"It will be okay, Therese. Camilla has simply forgotten herself right now."

"My, mother."

Therese smiled at her mother's words. Something in that scene sent a pang of pain through Camilla's chest merely having beheld it.

Just when was the last time that Katarina had held Camilla like that?

No matter how much she searched back in her memories, she couldn't find such a recollection. That mother with a kindly face had always said to her; 'You are a blessed child, there are so many others who face hardship each and every day... so you must be patient'.

That was how she had pushed Camilla away.

"She is *my* mother!"

Camilla's face twisted in rage as she screamed. She could feel the heat beginning to build behind her eyes. But, no matter what, she couldn't cry.

– If I cry, then father and mother will scorn me even more.

The commandment to never cry had been ingrained in Camilla. Because she had parents, because she had been born into wealth, because she could lead a blessed life.

But, was it a fulfilling one? From the beginning, Camilla had always had to bite her lip and swallow back her tears, bearing everything that came her way.

“Stop stealing everything I have! You are not my sister! They are the only parents I have! They’re *my* mother, *my* father!”

Her voice began to crack up as she shouted, trying to grab Therese again. She wanted to wring her by the neck. She wanted to drag that lying Therese out of here, out of the place that was supposed to be her home. She wanted to peel off that mask, and let the world know her true face.

However, she couldn’t reach her. Before she could grab her dress, someone else grabbed Camilla’s arm.

“Stop this at once!”

Patrick’s voice was sharp and enraged.

Her father turned her around to face him, his face full of anger. It was the face of a good father, *protecting his daughter*.

“Take those words back this instant, Camilla. Just as I am your father, I am also Therese’s! You truly are sisters!”

As those cruel words finally fell, Camilla stared at Patrick.

“It was our fault for never having told you. But, that does not mean I can abide by what you said. Apologize at once, Camilla. What you’ve said has hurt Therese.”

Therese clung to Katarina. Katarina hugged Therese back.

Patrick stood in front of the two of them, holding Camilla’s arm firmly in place.

Camilla opened her mouth.

She wanted to say something, but the words died on her tongue.

– Ah...

So, that’s how it was.

Therese’s mother, Viscountess Neumann, had always been frail and sickly. She had always been told that giving birth to a child would have been difficult.

Despite that, the couple kept trying, and eventually, a miracle known as Therese came into their lives. But, the truth was, she was not really a miracle.

Viscount Neumann and his brother had always been close. Therefore, Patrick and Katarina gave him their baby to raise as his own.

To Viscount Neumann and his wife, Therese was such a cute child that she instantly became the apple of their eyes. Moreover, it wasn't difficult for the Storm family to take her back after all this time either. Thinking about it logically, they were simply replacing Camilla, the daughter they lost, with another of their trueborn daughters.

It really was a simple tale, in the end.

The Neumann family only occupied the lowest rung on the ladder of peerage, only nominally considered nobility, and their property was not worth much at all. Without the assistance of the House of Storm, it was hard to see them surviving as a noble house.

Therese was a daughter of House Storm. However, despite that, she lived a life of comparative hardship, whilst her sister Camilla had lived in opulence.

The way Patrick and Katarina defended Therese now was like the physical manifestation of their guilty conscience. Whilst Camilla lived richly and selfishly, at times their other daughter lived in a household that didn't know whether or not a roof would still be above their heads the next day. She was a pitiable girl.

'You are a blessed child, there are so many others who face hardship each and every day.'

The intent had never been malicious. Everything had begun with only thoughts of kindness in their hearts. That was the truth about the warm and gentle Storm family.

"...I understand now."

Shaking off Patrick's arm, Camilla murmured quietly.

The blood that had been boiling in her head ran cold. She wondered just what everything she had ever strived so stubbornly to do was even for in the first place.

When she had been in pain, when things just hurt too much or when she felt like she was about to burst into tears... Camilla had bit her lip and gone to the orphanage.

As someone born into privilege, she had helped those young children from the poorest strata of society. She hadn't done it for the sake of others. She had done it so that she herself could carry on. So that she could swallow those bitter tears and carry on.

But, in the eyes of Camilla's parents, it was wasted effort. No matter what Camilla did at the orphanage, their view never changed.

Because, the truth was, there was only one person that Patrick and Katarina truly sympathized with.

"In the end, the only value I had to you, mother and father, was someone to push their guilt onto?"

She could feel the tears welling up.

But still, Camilla bit her lip and blinked them back.

She couldn't admit just how much it hurt.

Therese was six years old when she learned that she was, in fact, a daughter of the Storm family.

The Neumann house was forever teetering, it seemed like it would only be a matter of time before it finally collapsed.

Her *father and mother* had often apologized to Therese. For all the hardships that she was being put through, that she was having to endure as such a young girl, saying that they were failures as her parents. *We're so sorry.*

She didn't want to hear those words. They only made her more miserable.

Therese's nature was twisted by those constant apologetic words. Although they never told her things directly, Therese was a bright girl for her age, and eventually figured it out.

You've become an outsider. So, we apologize. We're not your real family. Just thinking about it was painful. It was miserable. She wanted someone to save her from that pain. She couldn't take it anymore.

But, even though the Storm family were her real parents, they didn't want to take Therese back, not letting her stay whenever she came to their home. It made sense, of course. Because they were the ones who had *thrown Therese away in the first place.*

– I want to be saved.

Therese had always clung to her cousin's hand. Although her real father and mother had abandoned Therese, there was still that girl... her real sister...

– Please don't leave me.

Camilla, without knowing anything, had pulled her hand away from Therese's. To Therese, it was a betrayal by the one person she had left to cling to.

– Why?

Even though they were family. Even though they were sisters. Even though they were *true sisters.*

– I would never abandon you like that...

No matter how fearsome their opponent might be, she wouldn't abandon her. That hand of Therese's that Camilla abandoned all those years ago would now be the very same hand that saved her.

So long as Camilla asks Therese to save her.

– I am different from you, sister.

That was all.

Therese pushed Katarina off her and barrelled past Patrick, rushing to Camilla's side.

She didn't care about the astonished look on her parent's faces. Sidling up beside Camilla, she spoke in a whisper so soft that only she could hear.

"Oh, my poor sister."

At the sound of that sweet voice, Camilla turned to glare. She was met by Therese's face, that was full of a bright smile.

"Those parents of ours have already abandoned one child. There's no reason why they would hesitate to do so again. I don't think there's any reason to so desperately cling to them, is there?"

"Therese...!"

In contrast to that sweet voice, those words were laced with venom. As far back as she could remember, ever since her attitude towards her changed, Camilla had never recalled Therese being so frank and direct with her words. Perhaps there was no time for biting sarcasm or veiled mockery now?

"I won't abandon you, sister. If you wish for me to save you, then I'll do everything I can to help you. That's what family is for, isn't it?"

"I don't need you to save me!"

Camilla pushed Therese away from her. Patrick and Katarina glared in fury, but neither of the two girls cared.

"Please don't be stubborn, sister. Just take a moment to think about this calmly. With the position you're in right now, can you truly say that there is anyone else you can cling to? I can talk to Miss Liselotte on your behalf. I am sure that I can help convince your accusers to seek a lighter punishment for your crimes."

"I do not need it! I haven't done anything wrong!"

Therese didn't hesitate, even after Camilla's firm rebuke. She simply looked at her sister with a pitying gaze and a shake of her head.

"You're only lying to yourself, now. I am the only one here who is truly on your side. But, that's fine by me. No matter how tough things may get, no matter how hard they might be to endure, you can always ask me to help you. You can always take my hand, sister."

Therese smiled, reaching her hand out to Camilla.

Camilla silently glared at the hand held out towards her.

Camilla would not take Therese's hand.

Even if Therese was truly her sister, that didn't change what she had done. She had played a role in Camilla's fall, and continued to hurt her after the fact. The inclination to forgive and forget, to take that hand that offered salvation... didn't exist at all in Camilla's heart.

That's because Camilla didn't come back to the royal capital to be judged. She hadn't come here to save herself, either.

Camilla herself was a part of the mayhem that was currently tearing apart Mohnton. She was here for the sake of that land, as well as for Alois' sake.

She had nothing to be ashamed of. She wasn't afraid. That being said, she also had no intention of martyring herself either.

Camilla believed steadfastly in everything she had done, and in the same vein, she also adamantly believed in Alois.

So, even when the day of the trial came, she held her head up high.

Even with all those eyes on her, most of them staring with undisguised hatred. She puffed up her chest, stood tall, and looked straight ahead.

She would not have any regrets.

○

Time flows back, to when Camilla had almost arrived in the capital city after leaving Mohnton.

Thinking about the girl who wasn't here anymore, Alois grimaced in exhaustion.

He had received a report the night before that Vilmer had been seen in the town of Falsch, ruled by the Ende family. Not long after he arrived, the formations and movements of the rebel forces had begun to change. Although the Falsch and loyalist forces had been clashing intermittently near the town for days, suddenly the rebel forces had been withdrawn.

Klaus said it was the precursor to a new offensive. Apparently, they were going to direct all of Einst's soldiers at a single point as a spearhead.

The warriors from Einst were a much more formidable foe than those of Falsch. After confirming the details of their strategy with the heads of the Ende family, they would launch a furious assault on the capital.

The soldiers of Einst were easily the most talented and skilled warriors in all of Mohnton. In a straight fight, even the handpicked capital garrison wouldn't be able to resist them. The people of Blume couldn't be expected to withstand either. Many of them were more learned men, not anything like Einst's hardened troops. At best, the only real defense the town had were the vigilantes.

There had been a gathering of volunteers, but they couldn't be expected to stand against a true army. Both Grenze and Blume were not places used to war, and it was unreasonable to expect them to resist the soldiers of Einst.

With Einst and Falsch joining forces against him, Alois knew that the vast bulk of Mohnton's seasoned fighters now stood against him. Everyone else knew just what Alois was up against as well.

And in the midst of such adversity, Alois' reputation as a lord did him no favours.

Despite how kind and gentle he may seem to be, how could people truly lay down their lives for a lord who was so distant and insincere? Because of how he had acted as a lord for a long time, Alois knew he had cultivated little by way of trust and loyalty. Alois was painfully aware of it.

– Camilla...

He hadn't wanted to let her go. Trying to dispel the deep remorse he felt over it from his mind, Alois shook his head. Right now, the only thing he could do was to solve the problems that lay before him.

Even if everyone else were to give up and abandon him, Alois himself could never give up. In order to protect this land, in order to protect Camilla, he had to stand tall and look straight ahead, not shirking from the slings and arrows.

Those were Alois' sincere thoughts.

– Though, in saying that, I really am exhausted...

The dawn of the fifth day since Camilla had left was fast approaching, as the night sky began to brighten. Alois was all alone in his bedroom.

When the soldiers of Einst began to march on the capital, things would get even more hectic. Klaus had forcibly removed him from his desk and told to get some sleep before that happened.

Whilst Alois took a rest, Klaus was organizing things in his stead. Alois had insisted that he just listen to 'one more report, one more report' before sleeping, but as one report blurred into the next, Klaus got frustrated and kicked him out. Alois finally relented and said he would take a rest, but he was finding it difficult.

He thought about heading back to work soon, but his body felt sluggish and hard to move. Maybe Klaus was right, and he should take a rest before he actually collapses.

Alois sank into his chair, his hand on his forehead. His nerves hadn't settled enough to let him fall into a deep sleep, but maybe if he stayed still and closed his eyes, he'd be able to sink into a fleeting nap.

Just as he felt like he was on the verge of sleep, someone knocked on his door.

"...Lord Alois, would now be a good time?"

It was Nicole's voice he heard through the door. After giving her permission, the door opened slowly, and he heard her nervous voice.

"I'm sorry for disturbing your rest. But, I felt like I really ought to give this to you..."

Nicole had a small basket in her hands.

As he peered inside, he saw a pile of slightly misshapen cookies.

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Alois stayed seated in his chair as he looked at what lay inside Nicole's basket. Nicole shook ever so slightly as if she were intimidated by him.

"Um, this... these are the Mistress' cookies."

"Camilla's?"

"Yes... umm, though, the truth is she just made the dough, I baked these ones..."

The biscuit dough that Camilla had made before being taken to the royal capital, still left unbaked, had been kept preserved by Günter. Nicole told Alois that they had already used up several manastones keeping the storage box cold so that the dough wouldn't go off.

"I asked Head Chef Brandt if I could have some of it. Um, I know I did something truly selfish without asking... the Mistress even said that she didn't want Lord Alois to eat any until she had made the taste perfect too..."

But, even so, Nicole still looked at those cookies. A mix of trepidation and frustration flashed across her face in a blur.

"But I'm sure that, deep down, the Mistress would really want you to eat these, Lord Alois."

More than anyone else, Nicole was the one who had spent the most time by Camilla's side in this land called Mohnton.

She had been saved by Camilla, she admired Camilla, and she always wanted to do her best for Camilla. But now, Camilla is far away and all alone.

Nicole was just a single young maid. She didn't have power enough to rescue Camilla on her own, nor did she have any way to really help Alois either. But despite that, she wanted to do something, she couldn't just wallow in sadness.

"Umm, the cookies, I'll leave them here, then? I'm so sorry I bothered you so early in the morning."

After closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, it felt like something had been lifted off Nicole's shoulders. With a short bow, she placed the biscuits on the table and left the room quietly.

Once the echoes of her footsteps in the hallway died away, Alois was left all alone with those cookies in that silent room.

Alois managed to haul his exhausted body to its feet.

Then, he approached the basket that Nicole had left behind.

The basket was small, with the bottom of it covered by a white cloth. On top of that were a disorderly pile of vaguely round shaped cookies of all different sizes.

It wasn't as if he were hungry. But, perhaps his body moved on his own, simply hearing Camilla's name? He unconsciously reached out to the basket, took one of those cookies, and brought it to his mouth.

The biscuits had a soft texture and a simple taste.

He felt like he'd eaten something like this before. It was far less fancy or nuanced than anything the chefs in his kitchen would make, yet he still found the taste irresistible. This taste, it's...

Was it similar to the cookies that he had from the orphanage in Grenze?

– ...No.

They were only *similar* to the biscuits that he had from the orphanage.

The truth was, the taste that Alois had only had once, long ago, really was unforgettable.

○

The lamentable prince, who knew not even his own face. The penal duchy occupying the wilds of the north, a land of criminals and sinners. A child, unloved by their parents. The only thing he had ever asked for out of desire, a cookie with a simple taste.

His parents' demise at the hands of his own magic. A final magic charm kept secret for years. That tiny spell that Camilla had cast.

Something overflowed from the depths of his body. Sealed magic and sealed *memories*.

Alois stood in silence. As he stared down at the biscuit in his hand, he couldn't move, the breath caught in his throat.

“...Camilla.”

He called her name through a desperate gasp. He saw a fleeting image of Camilla's raven black hair, overlapping with the face of a crying girl, whose name he never learned.

“You, once again...”

She had found him.

Just how had she done it again?

“Alois, you alright?”

Had the time for their meeting already come? As Klaus said that, he didn't even knock as he strode into the room.

Alois stood with his back to the door as Klaus approached him. But, he stopped a few feet away.

“Alois?”

When he spoke his name, Alois turned around to look at him. When Klaus saw Alois' pale face, he was taken aback.

Klaus stared at him in stunned silence for a few moments, then turned away from him, muttering.

"Alois... your eyes."

Hearing that, Alois raised a finger to his eyes.

They were damp and wet, with water spilling down his cheeks. It took a moment for Alois to register that those were, in fact, his own tears.

The more the tears fell, the more he felt his magical power pumping through his veins. It was unconsciously beginning to take the form of that loathsome curse from back then.

Alois put his hand on his chest, trying to hold back that despicable hex from his past. As Alois did, Klaus stepped back from him, murmuring faintly.

"You've remembered... You've seriously remembered who you are?"

Without saying anything, Alois turned to look at him slightly.

The complicated look on Klaus' face was obvious as he looked at him.

"...Do you want to go back to the royal capital?"

As Klaus asked him that, Alois hesitated for a moment.

But, it was only a moment, as he nodded.

"Yes."

The royal capital still held Camilla. With this, he may be able to truly bring her back.

"I want to go."

They were the most honest words he'd ever spoken in his life. The truth was that he had wanted to chase after her the moment she stepped out of the house.

Klaus frowned bitterly. Brushing his hair off his face with a frustrated sigh, he didn't hesitate to say the cruel words on his lips.

Alois knew why Klaus would say it. But even if he knew how Klaus would react, he couldn't help it. He loved her, after all.

"...There's no way I can let you."

Klaus' face seemed pained as he stared at Alois, who was suppressing his magical power. It was a painful expression, but a strong one.

"Just now, we got a message from a scout in Falsch. It seems like a joint attack from the Einst and Falsch forces is imminent. The mages from Falsch are already moving as a vanguard. The biggest battle so far is going to begin any moment now."

"...Is that so."

“We’re completely on the backfoot right now. But, you still have people standing by your side, since they believe in their Lord. Your opponents are rebels, you have to show that you’re the legitimate ruler of this land.”

It was a still and quiet morning. The only thing that could be heard from outside was a faint birdsong. Klaus’ strong voice echoed in that silent room.

“I know just how much you want to go to the capital... If I were you, I’d just leave all this behind and go straight away! I mean, what truly ties you to this land anymore!?”

The truth was, Alois had no reason to feel any responsibility for Mohnton. If he abandoned this land and left for the capital, knowing this truth, the only people who would scorn him for his decision would be the people of Mohnton themselves. Rather, it would be the people of Mohnton who would become the object of scorn, should they try and keep him here against his will.

“But, you can’t. What would happen if you left now? We don’t have enough men, and morale is hanging by a thread. The opponent is marching right up to our gates with enough power to flatten us completely!”

“Klaus...”

“Honestly, I really want to let you go. But, I can’t allow it. If you’re really dead set on going, I’ll stop you, even if that means fighting you myself!”

“Klaus, I know.”

As Klaus teetered between duty and friendship, Alois shook his head.

He’d always known that Klaus was a good man. But, Klaus wasn’t physically strong, he couldn’t hope to ever beat Alois in a fight. Even though he must have known that himself, he still said it.

Alois truly had a good friend in him. Even if their numbers weren’t huge, the people who still stood by Alois’ side were truly loyal. If Alois left them now, just what would happen to them all?

He truly wanted to go to the royal capital straight away. But, Camilla had also wanted to protect this place as well, to protect Mohnton. He couldn’t turn his back on them. Even if it wasn’t Alois’ land by birth, it was still a place that Alois wanted to protect.

“I won’t leave.”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Alois said that. He did his best to calm down, controlling his pained breathing.

He tried to reassure him, but Klaus’ face looked bitter and full of self-loathing. Just what kind of expression did he wear as he faced Klaus? Alois himself couldn’t know.

“Alois, I’m sorry.”

Klaus managed to breathe out those words as he looked up at Alois.

“Just a little more... just wait a little bit longer, until we can turn this around. Two days? No, maybe even just one day...”

Despite the circumstances, Klaus was still scratching his head, trying to formulate a plan.

But, the light at the end of the tunnel was so far away, no matter how much he thought he could barely see a glimmer.

“Lord Alois! My deepest apologies for interrupting your rest, but there’s urgent news that you must hear!!”

A soldier barged into the room unannounced, raising his voice. The man looked like he had run a marathon. His face was flushed red as he panted. It was immediately obvious that something unexpected had happened.

Both having the same bad premonition, Klaus and Alois’ expressions stiffened as a chill ran up their spines.

“Reporting! The rebel leaders in Falsch had called up the troops from Einst, and in response, they’ve...!”

The seating gallery of the immaculate court, located in the very center of the royal capital, was filled to the brim with nobles of all standing.

They had all come to see the downfall of the quintessential villainess, Camilla. In order to tip the balance in the ongoing struggle between Prince Julian and Prince Eckhart, all the nobles of the capital were invited to observe the trial.

The courtroom was packed to the rafters. There were even members of the lower aristocracy outside, bargaining with the guards to be permitted inside the full courtroom. Beyond them, it seemed as if every journalist in the city had turned out for the occasion, climbing trees and pressing up against the gates to try and catch a glimpse of the courtroom through any and all windows.

Amongst those in attendance were the Count and Countess Storm, Camilla's parents. Diana had come as their servants, whilst Therese stood beside them as well, waiting for the precise moment when the stubborn Camilla would finally break down.

Therese's parents, Viscount and Viscountess Neumann, were also watching in trepidation.

Sitting opposite those in attendance in his high seat was a judge who had pledged to God to be fair and impartial. Sitting on the judge's left side was Prince Eckhart, whose serious face seemed even dourer as he crossed his arms with a glare.

On the other side, were the two who had brought the accusations against Camilla; Prince Julian and his betrothed, the Lady Liselotte.

A slender and beautiful form. The silver hair that she had lost herself chasing after. But no matter how much she chased him, those beautiful crimson eyes had never looked Camilla's way.

Now, however, they coldly regarded Camilla, as she stood below their high seats.

Liselotte sat right next to Prince Julian. She had the blonde hair all the members of the Ende family possessed, as well as red eyes imbued with magic that matched those of the Prince. That expression of fear and hurt, mixed with a touch of pity, was it true or just another falsehood? It didn't matter to Camilla anymore.

She had once loved that man, and she hadn't yet forgotten him. Yet, despite how coldly Julian looked at her, it didn't budge Camilla's heart anymore.

The crime that Camilla was charged with, as accused by the Prince himself, was being the leading cause of a general revolt in Mohnton.

She was accused of seducing and sullyng the hardworking and diligent Duke Montchat, twisting his heart around her finger and making him lose his mind. Using her puppet, the Duke, Camilla had set out to destroy the territory by striking at its very foundations.

It was only thanks to his faithful servants that Duke Montchat managed to regain some of his sanity, but when he tried to have the treacherous Camilla leave his lands, she had him poisoned. Then, in her

most dastardly act yet, she framed the loyal servants of the Duke as the culprits, those noble souls who only wanted the best for Mohnton.

With those faithful servants gone, Lord Montchat once again lost his mind. The people, finally sick of Camilla's tyrannical hold over both the Duke and the Duchy, rose up in revolt to save their land.

"That is false."

The Prince didn't even raise an eyebrow at Camilla's firm denial. Folding his arms, he breathed out, staring down at Camilla.

"Can you prove that?"

"Lord Alois knows the truth of it."

"...You expect us to take testimony from a man you've caused to lose his mind?"

As if Camilla had said something utterly absurd, Julian spat out those words quietly. Then, he shook his head slightly.

"Right now, Duke Montchat is busy in his attempts to pacify Mohnton. He would not abandon his land to come and attempt to futilely prove your perjuries. On the other hand, however, there is a witness here who can corroborate all the details of your crimes."

As he said that, the Prince cast a glance at the court wardens. They immediately left the court, then came back with a person in tow.

The light brown hair of the Lörriich family, mixed with streaks of white. Those cold and hateful eyes with which she had regarded Camilla before were nowhere to be seen.

When *that woman* stepped into the courtroom, she let out a frightened cry.

"It's that woman! That evil witch tried to twist Lord Alois' mind, and when that didn't work, she poisoned him! Oh, it hurts even to think about...!"

Shivering like a terrified doe, she covered her face with her hands. There were few in the courtroom who didn't feel sympathy for the shivering old woman with the trembling voice.

"...Gerda!"

"Make no mistake, just as I have testified to His Highness Prince Julian, this woman has plunged our land into despair! Look at how she stares at me! That shocked face of hers, that's the face of someone who knows her crimes are about to be revealed!"

She uncovered her eyes, pointing one of her thin fingers at Camilla. Following that finger, the eyes of everyone in the court settled on the girl who stood accused.

"The people of Mohnton can never forgive that woman. She is the reason why they were forced to rise in revolt. Everyone in Mohnton agrees. Please, I beg you, make her pay for her crimes...!"

Camilla felt lost for words in the face of Gerda, who screamed in anguish. It was as if she had seen a ghost. She couldn't even begin to understand why she was here. And the fact that she had thrown away

the mask of the cold woman she had always known, instead playing the part of the despairing old woman, only confused Camilla further.

Just as Gerda said, Camilla must have looked stunned. People must have also taken Camilla's shocked silence as a tacit admission of guilt as well.

"This woman is the most senior maid who serves the Montchat family. She has been a faithful servant of the Montchat line since the reign of the previous Duke, and a proud member of the Lörriich family. You can rest assured that her words are as faithful as her service."

Prince Julian stood up, interrupting the pallid silence between Camilla and Gerda.

"The truth is easy to discern. Who has spoken true, the ever loyal servant or the recidivist exile from the capital? The evidence is clear to see by observing Mohnton itself. If Camilla were truly innocent and Duke Montchat truly sane, then by all rights a popular revolt would not have broken out in Mohnton."

Prince Julian spoke eloquently to the court at large.

"The conclusion is evident. This woman did not learn her lesson in exile and is as insidious as she ever was. I, too, share some burden of guilt for naively lightening her punishment, believing that there is good in everyone... Now, let us make our judgment, and this time, I shall not make the same mistake."

"Wait a moment, Julian! Deciding the verdict in such a way is utterly absurd!"

As Julian tried to neatly wrap up the trial, Prince Eckhart raised his voice angrily. Standing up, he glared at his half-brother.

"If that woman is truly guilty of the crimes you accuse her of, then why is she here? If you say that she was attempting to grasp power in Mohnton, then why has she left that land behind to travel to the capital at a time of such crisis!?"

"My first intention was to help this woman. I organized to have Camilla Storm escorted to the capital for her own safety. However, not long after that, I discovered the abnormalities in this case."

"Abnormalities? You mean, more abnormal than you inviting someone you consider guilty of treason to the capital?"

"I only discovered the truth after consulting with Liselotte. She is a native of Mohnton, after all. It was then that I was also introduced to Gerda. Yet, even after I heard her testimony, I wished for there to be a fair trial so that all may know the truth of the matter."

"A fair trial!? Where is this fair trial, I ask you!? Without even giving her time to think, to organize a defense, this is nothing more than a show trial!"

Despite Eckhart's enraged shout, Prince Julian didn't bat an eyelid. He simply shrugged his shoulders as he shook his head.

"Dear brother, in your excitement, have you truly taken note of your words? Would it not be stranger still to give an obvious criminal time to prepare a laundry list of excuses? Irrefutable arguments and

solid witness testimony have been brought to bear against her. Gerda is not alone, either. There are many who await the opportunity to testify in regards to Camilla's many crimes."

Then, Prince Julian's voice lowered an octave. But, that quieter tone still intentionally echoed through the courtroom.

"What's more, I would hope you would use this opportunity to become more accustomed to trials, brother. Who knows just when you might also stand where she stands now?"

"You bastard...!"

"Let us not profane the court with such words. This is a place of reason, so let it remain so."

Prince Julian only regarded Eckhart out of the corner of his eye. The difference between the two of them was abundantly clear. Whilst Prince Eckhart had buffeted him with harsh words, Prince Julian had remained calm and resolute. From the whispers and nods in the audience, it was clear they sided with Julian.

As Eckhart stood speechless, Julian turned once again towards Camilla.

"...You pitiful thing. After being exiled from the capital, I had thought you would reflect on your misdeeds. But, it seems even that is beyond you."

He didn't shout, but his words were bitterly cold. Though, despite how cold Prince Julian looked... the members of the audience with sharper eyes would have noticed the slight flash of genuine pity in his expression.

"You have no friends, and nowhere left to turn. Not even a land of criminals could accept *someone like you*."

She had been betrayed, driven into a corner and used. By those same two people who it was common knowledge, she had similarly oppressed herself. She had nowhere left to turn, no one who could stand by her side. Even the people of Mohnton, whom she had come here to protect, could not help her.

Prince Julian looked down at Camilla, a strange sense of pity in his eyes as he regarded the stepping stone to his ambition that would soon disappear.

Camilla returned that gaze with a glare.

"No."

– Just saying whatever you please...

Those parents who scorned their foolish daughter. The public who vilified and hated her. The little sister who wished to save her at the moment of her fall, and Gerda the one who wants to push her. Camilla was surrounded by enemies.

– Yet, still...

"I do not want your pity."

Everything she had done up until now, she would stand by it. That was the way she lived.

Camilla's love. All the people she had met along the way.

She would not cast aside those days that she spent in Mohnton.

"...So be it."

That small look of sympathy disappeared, as Julian's voice became colder than ever.

"Then, we shall pass judgment... are there any objections?"

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“Reporting! The rebel leaders in Falsch had called up the troops from Einst, and in response, they’ve...!”

The two of them held their breath as the soldier raised his voice.

But, the blood that ran cold in their bodies began to flow again when he said something unbelievable.

“...The troops from Einst have not moved! Most of them have remained stationary, except for those who had already set off!”

“What did you say?”

Before Alois could say anything, Klaus questioned the soldier incredulously. But, before he could say anything more, another soldier burst into the room with a second report.

“Lord Alois! Reporting! In the battle between the Blume forces and elements of the army from Einst that had been continuing since yesterday, it appears the Einst forces have been repulsed!”

“Haaa!? Blume did that!? How the hell...!?”

“I-it appears an excellent commander has taken charge of the defense...”

“Excellent commander...?”

Klaus crossed his arms. There was only one name that came to his mind. Still completely stunned, he stood in silence.

“Lord Alois, b-bad news! Ever since we sent out the word asking for volunteers yesterday, we’ve received far too many applications, and we don’t have enough equipment or supplies for all of them!”

Alois blinked like he was in a stupor as yet another report came in. He needed a moment to fully comprehend the words that were washing over him one after another.

His fingers trembled, his body shivered, his heart shook. He had no words. The only thing he could do was let go of the breath he held between his lips.

And all that came to mind were all the places that he and Camilla had visited together.

○

Even though he still hadn’t thought much of Camilla back then, he still let her travel with him for the first time.

In the autumn of the previous year, Grenze came to know Camilla.

It was the first time Alois could remember lashing out in genuine emotion before.

○

“Noooo! I said I’m going to fiiiiight!!”

“Stop saying such idiotic things!”

The old woman who ran the orphanage rapped her knuckles over Rolf's head. That headstrong kid had immediately tried to run out when he heard the news.

"Even if you go, the only thing you'll do is get under everybody's feet! Making sure the soldiers are well fed is also an important job!"

"Buuuut...!"

"No buts! If anything should happen to you, then Lord Alois and Lady Camilla would be sad. The most important thing you can do now is to make food and pray for those two as hard as you can."

"Muuu," Rolf frowned, but eventually gave up and started moving his hands again. All the children were busy helping make food for the men from Grenze, as well as biscuits that they could carry with them as rations on the road.

They weren't people who could fight for Alois and Camilla, so instead the orphanage volunteered to help the soldiers. Even if it was just a little, they wanted to help however they could. Making meals and praying for their wellbeing.

The soldiers found the oddly misshapen biscuits funny, but still received them from the children with a smile.

○

"Hey, did you hear? Apparently, this fighting is all because of that villainess."

"I heard, I heard. That woman drove Miss Gerda out of the mansion, and all the other nobles revolted."

The Montchat estate in Grenze. A group of maids were gossiping with one another in hushed whispers.

"I heard that Lord Alois went crazy because of that woman. That Camilla, if it's her, I bet it's really true."

"If this is all true, isn't it really bad? We might have to get out of here before it's too late... Hey, you think so too, right?"

One of the maids turned to ask the smallest amongst them, a girl with chestnut brown hair. She was a timid and weak girl, who tended to start crying at the drop of a hat. She always went along with their talks before, but now she obstinately shook her head.

"I... I think that's wrong."

The maids all turned to look at her.

"What are you saying? You always used to bad mouth her when she was here as well. Why are you suddenly acting like such a goody-two-shoes?"

"I said that before... but not now."

The girl looked like she was on the verge of bursting into tears. But, wiping them out of her eyes, she turned her flushed face towards the other girls.

"Lady Camilla isn't that kind of person. I... I believe in her...!"

The girls looked stunned as they looked at her tearful face.

She was always the type to simply cry and keep silent in a tough situation. So, when faced with her suddenly strong voice, the maids found themselves looking at each other sheepishly.

○

The days became colder in the march towards winter. In the cataclysm of mana and miasma, he had desperately prayed that Camilla stayed safe.

However, despite Alois' fears, she managed to save the people of Einst who had been trapped underground, winning their faith through her actions.

He admired Camilla's strength of spirit and secretly envied her. Alois' trip to Einst changed him forever.

○

Einst did not move.

As she looked down towards the boulevard where the efforts to rebuild Einst were still taking place, Martha tore up the written orders sent by the Meyerheim family.

Her elderly body was supported by the two maids, Irma and Frida. Frida had only just finished her rehabilitation and had started to walk again. Her slightly hobbled gait reminded her of those dreadful days at the beginning of winter.

Einst were not of one mind. Some of the soldiery of the town had already taken up arms and left even before the orders came in. As well drilled and trained soldiers, no doubt they would become a terrible thorn in the side of the Montchat cause.

But, most of the men of Einst remained. The army that could have decided Mohnton's fate... the vast majority silently remained in their home town.

Einst was supposed to be under the influence of the Meyerheim family. They had served those lords of theirs since the town first sprang up.

But, the people of Einst were faithful, and would not soon forget the debts they owed. Alois and Camilla... How could they ever turn their blades upon their benefactors, the people who risked life and limb to save the people of this town?

Einst remained quiet. The ace in the hole the rebels sought to play never made it to their hand.

This was the reward those two had won, for securing a debt of honour from the people of Einst.

– That being said, I can't assume responsibility for those who have already left for the battlefield.

Einst will not move. But, the people who have already left Einst are a different story.

She thought of some such men who had left.

Though where they found all those arms and armour, Martha had no idea.

○

“...You guys sure are strong, huh?”

A guard who was aided by those two men whistled in admiration. Even though he also thought with the exact same blade as those men, they were far and away superior at their craft. It seemed like they were used to the fury of battle; their thoughts were sharp and their movements sharper. Just having these two nearby suddenly made it feel like there was no crisis at all.

“I have to say, you guys from Einst really are something else, after all.”

The guard looked at the hair colour of those men who turned his way. That chestnut brown hair was an indication they were descended from Meyerheim bloodline. Men from Einst, who by all accounts should have been his enemy.

But, for whatever reason, they had volunteered to serve in the capital's volunteer regiment. Their names were Theo and Leon. They had asked to be placed right in the thick of the action like it was the only thing they lived for. Alongside those two, there were also a number of other men who had come to the aid of the capital from Einst.

“But, is it really fine for you guys to be here? If you're here to fight for Lord Alois, won't you be disowned from Einst?”

As the guard asked them that, Theo and Leon glanced at each other. They didn't look worried at all, though. In fact, they exchanged bold smiles.

“It's fine. We wouldn't have been able to do anything if we were back in Einst anyways.”

“We told her that we'd lend her our strength. If we didn't come here, how could we honestly say we helped?”

A noise stirred behind Leon as he spoke. An enemy soldier raised a yell and rushed towards him. Turning away from the guard, the two men raised their swords and steeled their nerves.

○

Blume, a town filled with petals that danced on the winds and the laughter of people.

It was fun. It was beautiful. The people of Blume showed Alois a world he had never known before.

As the snows thawed, the spring sun that had risen over that town had illuminated Mohnton's future.

○

His uncle's teachings had proved to be useful once again.

Franz grimaced coyly as he heard the reports that the defense they'd mounted had been successful.

Franz's uncle, a man obsessed with his own militant ambitions, had taught him everything he knew about commanding and maneuvering men on the battlefield. Perhaps, Franz had learned more about this subject than even Klaus had.

The mercenaries his uncle had left behind. The vigilantes who swore to protect their town. Using these forces as a vanguard, he didn't overextend the volunteers who weren't used to the heat of battle.

Just what would Klaus think if he learned that his little brother had protected Blume with minimal casualties? Just imagining the look of shock on Klaus' face, Franz grinned.

– How's that, brother? I finally have something that I can beat you at.

○

Cowards?

They'll take that as a compliment.

Greedy people?

Say it as many times as you please.

“We're not interested in any flippant idealism! We're mercenaries, damn it! We don't need any fancy words, let's just get to the fighting!”

At first they were hired by Lucas, but then they were tempted to Alois' side through the temptation of higher pay. When that work dried up, they wiled away their time in Blume, until called up again. The man who had confronted Alois at the florist, the captain of those mercenaries, yelled that as he lead his men on the field.

“So what if they call us greedy!?! At least we know how to back the winning horse! Onward! We've got some pay to earn, boys! If you let those vigilante brats win out, don't ever expect to work under me again!!”

Wahaha, the mercenaries laughed, ribbing the vigilantes who marched alongside them. They had just finished breaking bread and drinking together.

And now they fought side-by-side against a common enemy.

○

“That's what I'm saying! We're just a band, right? Can we really apply to be soldiers?”

They wanted to do something, but they weren't soldiers. Victor, who had never held a sword or bow before in his life, spoke to his friends.

“If we went to the battlefield, we'd just be getting in the way... No, I'm not saying it's too scary, alright!?”

“...You coward.”

It was Verrat who cut through Victor's words with a sharp tone.

“If you're scared, just keep hiding in this basement. Being this much of a coward, you'll probably get cold feet on your wedding day as well.”

“O-ouch...”

As Victor's shoulders slouched at her words, Verrat looked around at her friends. Victor, with his violin. Otto and his oboe. Finne who sat with her flute next to Dieter at his drums. And lastly, Mia, Victor's fiancée.

“If your hands get injured out there, you won’t be able to hold your instruments anymore, I suppose. But, so long as I still have a mouth, then I can sing. If you’re scared, it’s fine to just stay here. I’m fine going alone.”

There wasn’t much she could do as a soldier with only her strength alone.

Verrat wasn’t someone who could fight on the frontline. All she wanted to do was swell the numbers of the volunteers. The thought of accidentally ending up on the frontlines sent a quiver through her heart.

But, Verrat didn’t let that fear show on her face. She kept her cool, as if such a thing didn’t bother her at all. She didn’t want to show an unsightly side of herself. She wanted to be the cool Verrat she once was.

– I can’t show them that side of myself again.

Mohnton was in crisis. For Alois and Camilla’s sake, she couldn’t be scared. She wanted to show off her good side to that temperamental mistress, at least once, after all.

“...I’ll tailor something for you, then?”

At Verrat’s words, Mia spoke up.

“So that you can come back safely, without getting hurt, I’ll make something that will look very cool on you.”

○

The year that he had spent with Camilla.

The towns of Mohnton that he had visited with Camilla.

As they learned to walk side by side, they began to tread a new path for all of Mohnton. There had been chaos, anger, bitterness, sadness, pain, joy and laughter. They had come to know so many people, getting involved in so many stories.

And all of those times had come home to roost.

The dawn’s sun shone through the window, dispelling the last vestiges of the night. As a breeze blew through the window, he remembered the winds that had carried the miasma.

It was a dark and lonesome land for the exiled and the criminal. But, the winds of change had come even to this land, that had remained rooted in place for hundreds of years.

“...All right, then!”

Klaus raised his voice as he clenched a fist. As he looked at Alois, who still remained silent, he didn’t hold his serious voice back at all. But, the excitement in his voice was obvious and he was desperately trying to hold back a grin.

“Then, I’ll leave the hard part to you! As for everything here, I think I can deal with it myself!”

“Klaus...”

“Making allowances for the boss being a little selfish from time to time is part of his vassal’s duties, right? So, in return, make damn sure you bring her back! Just so you know, if only one of you come back, you’ll never live it down!”

Alois nodded firmly.

Einst, Blume, all the volunteers that had gathered in the capital... There was no way they had all moved for Alois alone.

Camilla had come to this land. He and Camilla had travelled through it together. Those travels had made Alois who he was today. That unemotional and false man, haunted by his past, had transformed into a true lord during the days he had spent by her side.

“You owe everything to Camilla, right? So, hurry up and go save her! Quickly, get going! We’ll make sure that you have a home to come back to!”

“...Thank you.”

Those words felt like the only thing he could say. But, just who exactly was it that he was thanking?

The land of Mohnton was a gloomy and dark place, filled with constant swirling miasma. Even in the spring, most days in this northern territory were bitter and cold. A land spoken of in hushed and hateful voices by those in the south, only tolerated for the manastones it produced. But, perhaps that thank you was directed towards the land that Alois truly loved, and would do anything to protect.

“Get going, Alois! It’s five days by carriage, but if you’re by yourself it should only *take three days!*”

Alois didn’t say another word.

He didn’t feel even a shadow of the exhaustion that had plagued his tired body only minutes ago. Alois felt truly fearless for the first time.

– Are there any objections?

The murmurs in the court ceased at Prince Julian's piercing words.

It didn't seem as if a single person was going to dispute the verdict. Count Storm looked bitterly in his daughter's direction, Therese's eyes were full of anticipation for her moment. Diana's face was twisted in frustration, whilst Eckhart bit his lower lip in an attempt to subdue his anger.

The final downfall of Camilla, the infamous villainess, had finally come, and not a single noble in the courtroom or excited reporter outside were going to blink lest they miss it.

The judge prepared to read out his verdict. Then...

"...Wait."

A low voice echoed through the quiet courtroom.

"If you are courting objections, then I have one."

Murmurs began to erupt behind Camilla's back.

Everyone in the court and all those jostling for a view through the windows turned to stare at whoever had spoken. People's eyes widened in stunned surprise as the speaker moved towards the stand.

His silver hair lay loosely across his shoulders. The man was so tall that it only made his unusual hair stand out more. His face was marred by specks of sweat, and his breathing was slightly ragged. Had he rushed to be here? Although the exhaustion was plain in his face, those red eyes of his burned with an inner fire, transfixing the gaze of any who looked upon him.

Not a single person attempted to impede him as he intruded into the court. There was something beyond mere beauty that attracted the stunned gazes of both men and women.

Just who is that man?

Judging from his face, he had all the features of a member of the royal family. The sudden appearance of a third member of the royal family, other than Prince Julian and Prince Eckhart, left the room with their mouths agape. But, he didn't pay any mind to them at all.

Prince Julian's eyes opened wide in shock as the man kept approaching. Liselotte cast her eyes down and Gerda's face twisted. Eckhart leaned forward, taking a sharp intake of breath...

Finally, Camilla looked behind her.

And when she saw the man standing before her, she forgot to breath.

Was she seeing things? Why was he here? He was supposed to be far away, back in Mohnton.

But, before any of those questions could reach her lips, one name trumped them all.

"...Lord Alois!"

After hearing Camilla's cry, the uproar in the court began to grow.

Alois... Alois Montchat. The despised Toad of the Swamp, whose boggy domain the hated villainess Camilla was exiled to. But the man who stood before them now was far from how he was described in the rumours and gossip of the capital.

The man looked almost like... that's right, like a member of the royal family.

"Camilla..."

Ignoring the confused faces of the people who stared at his back, Alois stood in front of Camilla. Camilla stood in the very center of the courtroom, directly below the podium of the judge who had been about to pass sentence on her.

The princes sat either side of the judge. Alois turned to look at Prince Julian. Prince Julian forgot himself, and looked at Alois with undisguised hatred.

"Guards, drag this man from the courtroom. He is an imposter, claiming to be Duke Alois Montchat. However, he clearly doesn't fit his appearance at all. In fact, it's like that this accomplice is Camilla's last desperate gamble?"

Prince Julian tried to calm down the court with his words. That expression full of frustration and hatred was washed away, replaced by the face of the righteous Prince he wore before.

"And, even though it's nigh on impossible, if this really isn't an imposter, that means he has abandoned his land in a time of crisis to come chasing after this woman. Could such a treacherous man's words really be trusted!?"

Julian attempted to coerce the crowd with his words. Certainly, what the Prince was saying wasn't lost on them either. Was this mysterious man truly Alois? Just what kind of testimony had he come here to deliver?

Still, nobody dared move. Not a single one of the guards dared to attempt to drive away a man who carried such regal features.

That silver hair was something only those of the royal bloodline possessed. With hair like that, just who else could he be but Duke Montchat, a member of a royal branch family? But if it truly is Duke Montchat, then just how could that figure of his be explained?

The man at the center of all the attention spoke toward Prince Julian.

"Your Highness. Please allow me to say something first. Whether or not my word can be trusted can be decided afterward."

Prince Julian frowned. He was about to open his mouth to reject it, but Eckhart spoke before him.

"...So be it."

"Brother!"

"Let us hear Duke Montchat's side of things. He seems to be quite confident in himself?"

Although he was speaking to Julian, Prince Eckhart didn't pay him a glance as he looked at Alois. He studied Alois head to toe, as if scrutinizing every part of him that he could see.

"I wish to hear your story, sir. What's more, it was Julian himself who opened the floor to objections. There should be no issue in hearing what you have to say."

"Guh," Julian bit his lip in frustration. Considering all the eyes that were on them, it would be a bad move to suddenly renege on his own word, going against Eckhart and expelling Alois from the court. For Julian, who wielded popularity as a weapon, betraying the expectant eyes of the people would be like cutting off his own sword arm.

When Julian sat back in his seat reproachfully, he cast a quick glance at Liselotte, hoping that no one would notice. Liselotte nodded in silence, her face looking slightly uneasy.

With that, it seems like Prince Julian made up his mind.

"...It seems that my older brother wishes for you to speak. Fine, let it be so. But, I hope you will not waste our time."

"Thank you very much."

After bowing to the princes, Alois turned on his heel and addressed the people who had been staring at his back.

Turning that body of his, who those people once scorned but could now not tear their eyes off of, he took a deep breath.

"...I am Alois Montchat. The person who can prove her innocence."

Alois' voice resounded through the courtroom. He really did have a booming tone. Even though the courtroom had been on the verge of uproar just a moment ago, his voice passed above it all.

"But, before I speak, there's one thing I have to do. Something I need to show you all."

With those terse words, Alois turned to Camilla. He gave her the slightest of smiles to reassure her, as she stared at him in confusion.

"Camilla..."

As if to prompt her, Alois glanced at Prince Julian, then back to her. Whilst Camilla followed his gaze, Alois spoke again.

"Camilla, your magic."

When she looked back at Alois, he had drawn up closer to her. That calm voice that whispered in her ear was that soft tone she had heard so many times before.

"Please make the sign with your hand. I'll use my own magic to compensate."

"...Magic? What magic?"

As Camilla asked him that, Alois smiled. He spoke in an oddly familiar way... a voice she had thought of so many times in the past.

“The magic that Iboku taught you once.”

Camilla stood in silence.

But, almost as if she were naturally compelled to do so, her fingers began to slowly draw the sign in the air.

A magic sigil that should have been only have been known to members of the royal family. Camilla’s magic charm. Magic to dispel curses, magic to uncover the truth.

A long time ago, the boy that Camilla fell in love with had taught her how to do it as he guided her fingers.

– Julian...?

The moment that Alois’ magic entered through Camilla’s body and imbued the magic sigil she signed, Prince Julian had been enveloped by something.

As if Liselotte had been expecting something like this, she immediately began to cast her own protective magic on Prince Julian. But, even though her red eyes shone brightly, they were no match for Alois’. As if there were barely any resistance at all, Liselotte’s magic was blown away with overwhelming force, and dispelled the magic that had been cast on Julian.

As their magical power suddenly collided, the air in the courtroom became electric, pricking at the skin of the attendees.

A brilliant white light forced people to cover their eyes.

The light shone so brightly it traveled far.

As the magic shattered, the light could even be seen from the royal palace.

As the light suddenly faded, people beheld the aftermath. It was not Prince Julian who stood next to Liselotte now.

His hair didn’t shine silver. His eyes were not a regal red. His grey hair lacked any lustre, whilst his eyes were a muddy brown colour. The gaunt young man who stood there now looked very different to the prince who had been in his place but a moment ago.

Camilla recognized something in the face of the young man who had suddenly appeared before them.

When she used to live in the royal capital, that was the man Camilla recalled seeing Liselotte walking with, all that time ago.

“Duke Montchat...!”

She remembered when she had seen the portraits of the previous Duke Montchat of Mohnton. The man who stood up there in Prince Julian’s place was the spitting image of Alois’ father, who was supposed to be long dead.

But, behind Camilla, the sudden uproar drowned out her stunned murmur.

Someone screamed, pointing at the man who was Prince Julian.

“The ghost of the royal palace! That is... that is definitely the ghost...!!”

A scary story spoken of in whispers, akin to the rumours of the Toad of the Swamp, that has long been a favourite of the royal palace gossipers.

The stories had always gone was that it was the vengeful spirit of a noble wronged by the royal family, or perhaps a King of an earlier age, or perhaps even a real man who had secretly been poisoning the current King, causing his declining health?

A man with a pale but handsome face, well dressed and groomed, who passed through the royal palace like a ghost.

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Why?

Why was the first Duke Montchat, a member of the royal family, exiled to a land of criminals?

Why did the nobility of Mohnton repeat the practice of marrying within the family?

Why did the land forbid any entertainment or fun, simply allowing people only to subsist?

The shadow of the royal family. The reverence of the past. The endless traditions. It all made so little sense.

Without knowing the truth, it was impossible to figure out why things were the way they were.

○

A member of the royal family was found guilty and for political reasons, things were kept a secret, as they often were. Defeated in the struggle for succession against his elder brother, he was quietly exiled to a land of criminals. The four houses that pledged fealty to him and believed wholeheartedly in his innocence followed him into those abominable and miasma filled swamps.

From that point on, the Montchat family became the royal family's shadow.

In the past, Sonnenlicht was often at war with multiple foreign nations at the same time. Mohnton, a border duchy, was often subject to raids and incursions. Grenze was a fortress. Einst provided the soldiers. The Ende family researched sorceries with which to fight back. Mohnton became the bulwark that defended Sonnenlicht against foreign invasion, and the Montchat Dukes became the shadow that operated in the darker corners of the world at the royal family's behest.

They engaged in cruel experiments. They made battlefields become awash with blood. The truth of the Montchat family was kept in that far away land, as they became the royal family's dark hand.

But, such things weren't known to the people. The dark shadow that stretched behind the throne was kept secret and the shadows remained in the shade until their role became obsolete with the end of the wars.

Now, those unsightly scars only marred Mohnton.

Just when was it that they began to pine instead for the light?

The noble families of Mohnton, following the lead of the Montchat family, sought to protect their lineage from the taint of criminal blood.

In order to maintain their innocence, they kept marriages within the family, not contaminating their descendants.

They had never accepted this exile as the ultimate fate of their houses. This was not the place where their legacy would die. A land simply to subsist. In order to avoid being known as lords of a land filled with vice and corruption, they prohibited the sorts of entertainment that might have ignited such desires

in people, whilst also imposing those same harsh restrictions on themselves. They didn't need joy or fun until the Montchat family and their followers had returned to their rightful place back in the light. But, that wait soon seemed to be eternal.

A hundred years later, a certain Prince was born to the royal family. An unfortunate Prince, who was barely known to anyone and kept from the public eye.

By coincidence, that very same year, a boy was born to the Duke and Duchess of Montchat.

The time that they had waited for so long to come had finally arrived.

Now, the light and the shadow could be exchanged.

After the death of the Second Queen, the Second Prince whose true face was unknown, was secretly swapped with the son of Duke Montchat.

That boy's hair and eye colour were altered through the use of magic, and he became Prince Julian.

The Prince, who was whisked away to the north, had his memory sealed.

The truth was only known to the upper echelons of the Mohnton noble families, as well as a select few servants of the Montchat household, known for their faithfulness to the Duke.

No one else knew a thing. And because the deception was kept so secret, movements were made behind the scenes.

Everything had gone as planned.

Though eventually, there were two problems in the plot.

The first was the death of the Duke and Duchess of Montchat.

Being a branch family of the royal house, the Montchat family had always been blessed with strong magical powers. Before the practice of insulated marriage was put in place, that royal blood had been diluted somewhat after being exiled to Mohnton, but there was still strength in that line.

But, even their power combined was nothing compared to that of the Prince. Despite their efforts, the two of them could not completely seal away the young Prince's memories.

The result was that magical accident. As their magical was repulsed by the Prince, the couple lost their lives.

Fortunately for them, it seemed like the trauma over the incident caused the Prince to finish sealing off his memories himself. Despite it costing their lives, the last spell those two cast ended up producing the desired result.

The other was what would happen when the doppelganger 'Prince Julian' grew up.

Although his appearance could be altered with magic as a child, eventually the features of the Duke Montchat would be seen in his son as he grew up. Although the Montchat family were rarely seen in public, their features were known to the royal family. They had to keep up the deception somehow.

The illusion magic used to disguise his appearance was incredibly costly when it came to consumption of magical power. Eventually, the magical power of the Prince himself, supplemented by manastones provided the conspirators in Mohnton, would be exhausted.

So, when he couldn't keep the magic up anymore, the Prince ceased his magic in the darker parts of the royal palace. He had done his best to ensure that no one would see him, but as the number of times his magical power was nearly exhausted increases, inevitably there were sightings.

A pale face. The gaunt and lanky figure inherited from the deceased Duke Montchat. He was like a shadow, suddenly appearing and then disappearing in the blink of an eye. That was when the popular rumours about the ghost in the royal palace had begun.

Eventually, as an emergency measure, the most talented young magician from the Ende family was dispatched to the Prince's side.

A person who could both supply the Prince with the necessary magical power as well as be someone whose cover story would appear natural. Her name was Liselotte Ende.

In order to create a pretext for the two of them to be side by side, a false love story was concocted.

But, the lies they spun around Camilla to increase the validity of the tale inadvertently became its undoing.

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“Sir, you are...”

Eckhart was breathless as he looked at Alois. In his face, he saw the soft features of the Second Queen who had passed away.

“You are... You're the real Julian, aren't you?”

Alois didn't need to say a word. The truth was there to be beheld itself.

The imposter Prince and the man who bore the features of royalty, Alois Montchat. As the magical residue spread through the courtroom still, everyone was lost for words.

Alois looked up at Eckhart. His eyes looked almost nostalgic as he smiled.

Eckhart never knew just what the Second Prince, his younger brother, had truly looked like, but Alois remembered him. He had often felt sorry for his younger brother, locked away in the tower, and disobeyed his mother often to secretly come and see him. He had fond memories of his elder brother, who was always so serious.

“Brother, it has been a while.”

“Julian...!”

Eckhart jumped down from his seat and rushed towards Alois.

But, before he could reach him, a voice shouted out.

“W-Wait just a moment!”

That frustrated and angry voice belonged to none other than 'Prince Julian'. He called out to Eckhart, whilst covering up his face with his hand.

"Brother, why are you calling that man 'Julian'? Do not tell me that you have truly fallen prey to that illusion of theirs!?"

Whilst hiding his face, was he also hiding his expression? He couldn't suppress his emotion as he bellowed.

"That man has cast magic on me to change my appearance! How could you believe the words of a man who just committed a crime against the royal family!?"

"Julian... Or rather, Sir Montchat."

Eckhart turned to look at 'Prince Julian'. His expression was stern and confident.

"Do not attempt to tell me that you did not recognize the magic cast just now."

The spell that Camilla had cast. Everyone in that courtroom had seen her do it. Anyone familiar with such magic would recognize it at once.

"That was undoubtedly the dispelling magic of the royal family."

It wasn't just Eckhart who was convinced, either. In the courtroom, there were not just a handful of people who had immediately recognized it.

Only through the use of that secret magic was the truth uncovered. It was irrefutable proof of the subterfuge at play.

'Prince Julian' bit his lip in frustration. As he fumbled for the words that would spring him from this dire situation, he looked around him.

"H-However...!"

He scanned the crowd with his eyes.

He was met with a sea of inquisitive eyes. That ever insatiable and intrusive public interest that had been his weapon of choice until now. As for the reporters crowded at the window, their eyes looked at him with a mixture of anger and hunger for a story.

"However..."

Every single move he made was being watched, no matter how minute. He struggled to find even a single person who still looked at him with belief. Disappointment, pity, indignation. The utter dismay on the faces of those who had thrown in behind his cause. But, above all else, nauseating inquisitiveness. The same sorts of eyes that had always been pointed Camilla's way.

"Guh..."

There was nothing else to say.

His mouth agape, his breath came out in gasps.

"...*Lord Alois.*"

Then, Liselotte took his trembling hand in her own. Her eyes were full of resignation as she pulled 'Prince Julian' towards her.

"I'm sorry, I was powerless. I truly had wanted to help you."

"...Liselotte."

"Please, don't look at me like that. I may be a failure as a mage, but I will stay with you until the end."

As he turned to face her, only Liselotte could see the expression on his face. Seeing the real face of the Prince that only Liselotte knew, she smiled sadly.

With his hand in hers, he fell silent. 'Prince Julian' and Liselotte brought each other into an embrace as they closed their eyes.

○

'Prince Julian', Liselotte and Gerda were all lead away by the royal guards in the courtroom with no resistance.

They were to be escorted out of the courtroom straight away.

But, whilst passing Camilla, Liselotte came to a stop.

"...I suppose, this is what you would call *fate*, isn't it?"

Liselotte said that with a sad sort of smile. *Fate*. A word that had often been used to describe Liselotte and Prince Julian's love story. It all seemed utterly ironic now.

"It was my decision to exile you to the swamp. But in the end, everything turned out like this."

As Liselotte spoke with words full of self-loathing, the guards jostled her arm to try and hurry her up. But, Liselotte didn't move a muscle. She kept speaking to Camilla, as if catching up with an old friend.

"Do you know why I sent you to be with the real Julian?"

Camilla shook her head. She had always thought it was an act of malice. She assumed that the intention was a final mockery of Camilla, forcing her to marry a disgusting toad and become a source of laughter back in the capital.

But, now she felt differently.

"I, too, loved Lord Alois."

Liselotte eyes closed as that sad smile stayed on her face. It was full of pain and resignation, but it also felt strangely familiar. A smile like she was finally lifting a heavy weight from her chest.

"You and I really are like the light and the shadow, aren't we? But, whilst you changed Julian, I failed to change Lord Alois. I suppose that's the real difference between us."

'Alois' and 'Julian'. Both of them had been set upon a wayward path. But whilst Camilla had chosen to reach out her hand to him, although she had once used that same hand to strike at his cheek, she had sought to bring him into the light. Meanwhile, Liselotte strove forward down the path, not managing to bring the man she was with to the light.

They were two sides of a coin. Light and shadow.

Neither Liselotte nor Camilla had truly changed much as people themselves. They merely fell in love. And in that, wanted to do everything in their power to support the person who had captured their heart.

“It’s frustrating, but I suppose this is the end. My love was also fated, it seems.”

One of the guards forcibly grabbed Liselotte’s shoulder. They were wary that she might hold a grudge against Camilla, who revealed her crimes. She may even do something rash to try and drag at least one person down with her.

When the soldier really applied force, Liselotte couldn’t stand still anymore. She was pulled away from Camilla’s side.

“I always thought that it would have been nice to be friends with you. I’m sure we could have talked a lot about love. You were a stubborn and simple person, but I didn’t dislike that about you.”

Liselotte laughed as she was dragged away. She couldn’t know just what multitude of emotions dwelled in that smile of hers.

But, for once, Camilla felt like the smile on Liselotte’s face was a true one.

“So long!”

The last time Camilla heard Liselotte’s voice, it was bright and cheery.

She had detested Liselotte, who snatched her beloved Prince Julian away.

She’d cursed and bore a grudge against her.

That girl who always pretended to be meek and helpless, she should have been angry at those parting friendly words of hers, as if they were a final mockery

But, just why was it? Somehow... Camilla couldn’t truly bring herself to hate Liselotte.

She had fallen in love with the same person she had, doggedly pursued him in the same way, and used whatever means she had at her disposal. She had never given up. She didn’t have any regrets. She wasn’t the type of person to look back in remorse.

Perhaps, the two of them really were quite similar, in the end.

“...Goodbye.”

Camilla quietly called out to Liselotte’s back as she was lead away.

For their final farewell, it didn’t seem very fitting. But, she couldn’t think of what else she could say.

The two of them had always been in opposition. But, if it were a different time. In a different place. Then, just maybe, things may have been different.

As Camilla silently watched her leave, Liselotte gave her a final wave without turning around.

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The guardsmen lead Liselotte and the others out of the court.

With that, Eckhart pronounced the trial over and ordered the court to disperse.

Half of the reporters outside of the court had already begun sprinting back to their papers to hopefully make tomorrow's edition, whilst the others still loitered, sensing that there was still more to come.

The nobles in attendance couldn't cool their own excitement either. People's eyes were still locked on the centre of the courtroom. Straight at Camilla and Alois, who had overturned the trial together.

"Julian, Miss Camilla, you two ought to leave as well. I don't believe things will settle down anytime soon."

Eckhart spoke to Alois and Camilla with concern in his voice.

"I'll have a room prepared for you. I am sure we have a lot to talk about, don't we? And forgive me, but there are some questions I have to ask. But before all that, the two of you should get some rest."

The exhaustion in Alois' face was even more pronounced now than when he had burst into the courtroom. Ever since Mohnton's rebellion broke out, just how little sleep must he have gotten?

Eckhart also knew about the situation in Mohnton. That poor brother of his, just what burden did he have to carry in order to come here? It was all too painful.

"Brother."

Alois returned Eckhart's gaze. After a moment of brief hesitation, he softly shook his head and stepped back.

"My deepest apologies. I have to return to Mohnton as soon as I can."

"Julian?"

"The sole reason I came to the capital was for Camilla's sake. Please excuse my rudeness for not being able to receive your hospitality properly. I am sure that, one day, we'll be able to talk about everything that's happened."

As Alois bowed gratefully, Eckhart frowned. He looked at Alois and Camilla incredulously, as if he didn't understand what he was hearing at all.

"Do you... truly mean to return?"

Alois grimaced at Eckhart's words.

Mohnton's uprising had been instigated for the purpose of ensnaring Alois once again. After winning, either they would have done away with him for good or, if not, attempted to break his heart once more.

Alois' magical powers had been sealed off by Alois himself. It had been a symbol of that heart of his that had once been broken. An intangible manifestation of his remorse and regret.

They couldn't afford to let Alois unseal his true magic. Their former masters, the Duke and Duchess, had died sealing it away, along with his memories. Because with that power, Alois could overcome it all.

So, that's why Gerda had used that poison. And by framing her for the act, sought to separate him from Camilla. In order to protect the people of Mohnton, it was necessary to betray their lord and start a revolt.

Mohnton should be a place that Alois had come to despise. Both his circumstances and the miasma in the air had forced him to take on a grotesque appearance, the nobles of the land blamed him for every single thing they could, whilst the servants of his house had been overtly trying to exercise control over him.

The days he spent in that land had been hard and painful, it seemed insane that he would want to go back.

"You aren't a member of the Montchat family. You don't have any ties or responsibilities to that land, either. With the real heir to the Montchat family captured, the revolt should die down soon enough."

Even if Eckhart didn't know the full details, he could only imagine what Alois had been through. If that land was also truly loyal towards the Montchat family, then no one would welcome Alois' return now. On the contrary, he might be in danger of someone seeking to take vengeance against the man who was the cause of their master's condemnation.

"It would be especially dangerous for Miss Camilla as well. If you're concerned about the situation, I can send some men up north for you. There's no reason for you to return in person, is there?"

Alois shook his head once again.

He knew that Eckhart was saying all this out of genuine concern. And, just as Eckhart said, the fires of rebellion would soon be starved of oxygen. Perhaps, there was no real reason for Alois to hurry back at all.

But, still, Alois had a reason to return.

"In that land, there are people who are still fighting for my sake."

The people of Grenze, who had been on Alois' side from the beginning. Klaus and the people of Blume, who decided to throw in behind Alois despite knowing just how much opposition was arrayed against him. The people of Einst who refused the orders of the rebellion's masterminds, the Meyerheim family.

And, all the people back at the capital, who had stood by his side.

"Even though the crisis is still raging, it was thanks to them I was able to return."

When Alois made the decision to return to the royal capital for Camilla's sake, there wasn't a single person who tried to stop him.

Klaus told Alois that he'd protect his home until they got back.

Günter laughed heartily, whilst the cooks mentioned that without Camilla, the kitchen felt like something was ‘missing’ from it.

Nicole entrusted all the faith she held that Camilla would return in Alois, and the rest of the servants saw him off on his journey.

As Alois left the capital of Mohnton, the soldiers who had been manning the outskirts of the city saluted him as he left.

We look forward to your safe return.

“I’ve lived half of my life as Alois.”

Alois calmly gazed at Eckhart. But, the determination in his face was plain to see.

“The ruler of Mohnton, Duke Alois Montchat. The people of that land still recognize me as their lord.”

In his absence, Klaus was taking care of things.

But, before Alois left, he grabbed him by the shoulder and said ‘Make sure to come back.’

“I have people waiting for me to return. Those who are making sure I have a home to return to. A land that I have to protect.”

The northern land that was scorned by all in the south. Mohnton, a land of criminals and sinners.

That swampy land filled with nauseating miasma, that was Alois’ place to return to.

“I can never go back to being ‘Julian’. To throw away the name ‘Alois’ now, given everything that’s happened, would be like a betrayal.”

“Julian...”

Eckhart sighed. Then, after a moment of consternation, he spoke.

“...Then, so be it.”

Eventually, he looked at Alois with a stern frown.

“I’ll prepare a carriage for you to return in. What’s more, I’ll assign some of my men as an escort. That is your land, after all. Make sure to take care of it well, Duke Montchat.”

Although his face looked severe, Eckhart’s words were full of his true feelings for Alois. And, because of them, he accepted Alois’ decision.

He was a serious and honest man, who no one had ever seen laugh at a joke. But, that serious man had his similarities to Alois.

“Your Highness... thank you.”

“...Once things have settled down, promise me you’ll come and visit the royal capital once again. I’ll be content with that.”

Alois’ eyes opened wide with surprise as Eckhart gave him the smallest of smiles, before turning on his heel and leaving the court to help organize the carriage and escort he had promised.

After Eckhart left, Camilla finally felt able to breathe again, as she whirled around like a storm and grabbed the lapels of Alois’ coat.

“...So, it is true after all!? The fighting is still going on!?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Alois was slightly confused by just how pale Camilla had suddenly become. Camilla, meanwhile, had no idea why or how Alois had suddenly appeared in the royal capital.

“Is it truly fine for you to be here, Lord Alois!? Is everyone safe!? Just what is happening back in Mohnton!?”

Camilla had come to the royal capital alone for the sake of Mohnton. But, right now, she was desperate to know what was going on back there.

“What about the people in the mansion!? Grenze!? Einst!? Blume!?”

Nicole and Günter. Those irreverent cooks in the kitchen. All the people that Camilla had met in her travels. Was everyone alright?

When Eckhart was talking, did she stay silent because she didn’t want to interrupt the Prince? Or, was she simply overwhelmed with relief to see Alois? It felt like all the anxiety that had been building up in her mind for days was tumbling out at the same time as her words.

“We have to get back straight away...! If something happens whilst you’re away, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life!”

“Camilla.”

As Camilla finally found her voice again, Alois spoke over her. Despite how anxious Camilla sounded, she stopped to listen to his voice that was by contrast calm and confident.

“Camilla, if we go back, you really could be in danger, are you okay with that?”

He had come to the capital to bring Camilla back. But, he also wished for Camilla to be safe as well.

Now that the truth has been exposed for all to see, the royal capital wasn’t a dangerous place for her anymore. If he asked Eckhart, he was sure that Camilla would be kept exceptionally safe.

Staying here would certainly be safer than returning to Mohnton with him.

But, that worry Alois held in his heart was blown away by Camilla’s strong words.

“Of course I am!”

Still holding his coat with her gripped fists, Camilla answered without a moment's hesitation.

Alois couldn't help but laugh as he marvelled at her strength. The cautious and prudent Alois, who always thought, or perhaps sometimes overthought, one step ahead... she was his complete opposite.

But, maybe that's why he liked being with her so much. Perhaps, that's why she was able to force him to change.

And, maybe, that's why he fell in love with her.

"Let's go home, Camilla. Everyone is waiting for you to come back."

Alois smiled, as he held out his hand.

Camilla, again, didn't hesitate to let him go and reach out to take that hand of his.

But, just before she could, she heard a voice from the crowd behind her.

"Wait!"

As that scream broke through the courtroom, Camilla turned around to look.

"I won't let you take her! The one who'll take my sister's hand is me! The one who'll save my sister... is me!"

At her screams, everyone turned to look.

As they did, they saw a pitifully desperate Therese clambering over the pews set out for the audience, rushing towards Camilla.

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“She’s my sister! That’s my sister’s hand! You can’t just take it like that!”

As she lost her balance and tumbled forward, she reached out towards Camilla.

“You can’t take the hand of a man like that! You know that his real identity is just that ugly toad swamp! How can anyone call him a good man!?”

The people who watched from the periphery looked at Therese with cold eyes.

After the true identities of Julian and Liselotte had been revealed, both Camilla’s ostracization and reputation had been flipped on their head in a matter of moments. Right now, everyone saw Camilla as a sort of tragic heroine, who had been framed as a villain.

Meanwhile, people were keenly aware that Therese had been the source of information for many of Camilla’s supposed crimes. In order to isolate and cause Camilla’s downfall, Liselotte had used Therese.

The fact that Liselotte and Therese had become so publicly close after Camilla’s exile would also become a major point of suspicion against her. Therese was one of Liselotte’s accomplices. A key figure in Camilla’s tragic wrongful conviction.

All the people in the audience saw was the second of the two villainesses, who had worked so hard to frame Camilla.

“Choose me instead.”

But, Therese didn’t care about any of that.

A man had suddenly appeared to rescue Camilla, who she was supposed to save herself, and was now going to take her away for good. It was the worst possible turn of events for Therese.

“Don’t go back to the swamps. Such a disgusting place, I’m sure that you don’t want to return there again either, sister!”

“Therese.”

Therese didn’t listen to Camilla’s words. Like the same little girl who threw tantrums all those years ago, she shook her head as tears streamed down her face.

“Don’t leave me, sister...”

It was the first time she had ever seen Therese so truly desperate. Camilla, who never took anyone’s hand, had chosen someone else. She didn’t care about the hatred in the eyes of those who looked down at her, the only thing she was terrified about was the thought of losing Camilla.

Therese didn’t even look at Alois, that odious man who was trying to steal her Camilla away. The only person she stared up at was Camilla herself.

“Please, take my hand. I’ll save you, sister. No matter what!”

Therese reached out to her. Compared to Alois', her hand was small and dainty. Hands that couldn't protect anyone.

"Because we're family! I'll hold you close, whenever you need me! No matter how much it hurts, no matter how painful it is, no matter how sad! I'll share it all. All of your sadness! All of your pain!"

Family.

As they heard Therese scream that word, Viscount Neumann and his wife raised their heads. Therese, however, didn't notice.

Not caring at all about her appearance, her eyes were red and puffy as she wailed, tears streaking her face. And as she begged, no one took the hand that she reached out.

"Don't abandon me, sister... Please, don't throw me away again... Don't apologize... Don't leave... If I was in your position, I'd never let you go!!"

– Don't abandon me.

Don't apologize. Don't leave. Because we're family.

Sharing the same burdens. The same hardships. Even if they fell into poverty, even if they faced painful days, that was fine.

They would struggle together, overcome adversity together, and live happily together. As a family.

Don't apologize, father. Don't be sad, mother. Please don't abandon me, my real mother and father.

She didn't care about how hard things got. She didn't care about being poor. If they could be together, then she could bear all of it.

But, no one could be her real family. She was an abandoned child.

Soon after she was born, her real family abandoned her.

And as a young girl, Therese had always cried.

"Don't abandon me, don't abandon me, don't abandon me, please, don't throw me away... please don't go!!"

Camilla looked down at Therese as she sobbed.

It wasn't as if she didn't feel something for her.

It wasn't as if she didn't understand how she felt. Camilla too had always wanted a family that cared for her.

But, Camilla didn't feel sorry for Therese. That's because Therese *had always had what Camilla had wanted.*

"Sister..."

Therese kept stretching her hand out towards her, not wiping the tears from her eyes. Like a selfish child. After gazing at that hand for a moment, Camilla took a deep breath.

Then, after a moment's hesitation, slapped away that hand.

"A hand like yours could never save me."

Her voice was cold and stern. It was almost too cruel of a voice to use against a *crying child*.

But, Therese wasn't a little girl anymore. How could she pity or forgive her now, after everything she had done?

"If you want someone to save, then save yourself, Therese!"

"Sister..."

Therese was stunned by those harsh words of rejection.

She lost strength in her legs and sank to her knees.

As she did, she collapsed into heaving sobs.

Even at the very end, her sister still wouldn't take her hand.

As she fell to the floor, there was another commotion in the crowd.

There were two pairs of people; Viscount Neumann and his wife, as well as the Count and Countess Storm.

Camilla's uncle and his wife went straight to Therese's side. Meanwhile, Count and Countess Storm surged straight past them without stopping.

"Camilla!"

Camilla's father, Patrick, didn't even spare Therese a glance as he took the hand of his daughter that Therese couldn't.

"You... you really were innocent this whole time...!"

Camilla's mother, Katarina, took her other hand. She felt the breath stop in her throat. Just when was the last time she had touched her mother's hand, Camilla wondered? She could only vaguely recall the soft touch of her mother's hand when she was a young girl. The only other times she felt the harsh touch of her mother's hand from then on was when she was being punished.

"I'm so sorry, Camilla. We didn't believe you..."

As she looked past her parents who seemed like they were on the verge of tears, she saw the Viscount and his wife take Therese's hands in the same way.

It was as if Camilla and Therese had swapped places once again. Camilla continued to look at Therese, who still received hateful glares from the people in the crowd.

"I'm sorry... no."

Viscount Neumann almost said it, but he stopped himself.

"I won't apologize. You don't need to apologize to me either. If people wish to blame you, then we'll bear it together."

“We should never have let you go.”

Viscountess Neumann looked so pale it wouldn't surprise anyone if she collapsed after she pushed her frail body to run after Therese.

Although her hands were small and trembling, she hugged Therese as hard as she could.

“You'll always be our daughter.”

– Ahh...

Something she had always dreamed about.

What Camilla had truly always wanted.

“...We were tricked! We never suspected that Therese was someone who could do something like that!”

But, it was something she would never have. Her father's words reminded her of that.

“Father...”

“Because of Therese, you were put through so much pain. Ahh, we're so sorry... because she was an unfortunate child, we spoiled her too much. Who could have ever believed that she would do something like that to her real sister...”

Therese must have heard what Patrick was saying only a few footsteps away. Or, perhaps she was lucky and didn't hear him above her own sobbing. But, Camilla was sure her father wasn't thinking about that at all.

“It must have been so hard, being alone like that... I'm so sorry that we never noticed.”

“Mother...”

“You have always truly been our only daughter. Yes... because of an awful lie, we've done something awful. Even though you've been with us your entire life...”

As Katarina began to cry, Camilla looked down at her. Camilla and Therese. Both of them were their daughters. But, just once, have they truly thought about their words?

“Father, mother.”

Camilla called out to the two of them without any wavering in her voice. She tried to keep calm, but it seemed like it would be a futile effort. She could feel something beginning to boil in the pit of her stomach, and she felt like it would soon find its way to her voice, like it always did. But, for whatever reason, she felt strangely cold instead.

It was as if she had finally woken up from a dream.

“All this time, I told you that what they said was wrong.”

“That's right. You truly were innocent.”

Patrick nodded. He had always heard Camilla deny everything thrown against her. But, more than anyone, he should have truly *listened*.

“My innocence... did you ever truly believe in it at all?”

Patrick blinked. It took him a moment to realize that those were words of blame.

– Why did you never trust me?

He realized that’s what Camilla was trying to say.

“...I did, or rather, I always wanted to. Of course, I wanted to believe in my daughter! But, there was so much evidence against you... We were taken in by the lies and believed them... we were fools.”

The proponents of the lie were a web of conspirators that fooled the entire country. Believing in it, her parents really may have been fools. But, the conspiracy was too powerful. It was simply all an unfortunate series of events.

“Forgive us... you really are our true daughter. We love you, you have to understand that...”

We love you.

So, forgive us. Let everything be water under the bridge.

Camilla just couldn’t understand it at all.

They adored Therese out of love, and begged Camilla’s forgiveness out of love. When one waxed, the other waned. As they asked Camilla for forgiveness, just where had their love for Therese gone?

Did they think that just with ‘love’, everything could be forgiven and forgotten?

And in doing so, tear Camilla and Therese apart?

“...Let’s go, Camilla.”

Behind Camilla, who looked down at her parents, a stern voice spoke out.

It was Alois. He looked at Camilla with a severe expression.

“They’ve said more than enough. We don’t have time for this.”

“Lord Alois...”

Camilla looked back at Alois. But, Camilla’s parents didn’t let go of her hands.

They hadn’t yet heard the words they desperately wanted to hear from Camilla.

I forgive you. Those are the words they were waiting for.

“Don’t go, Camilla. You’re our daughter. You’re the only child we have.”

“You don’t have to listen to them anymore, Camilla. Let’s go.”

“...You go too far, Duke Montchat! She is our beloved daughter!”

Katarina screamed. To her, Alois' words were those of a cruel man, trying to tear apart her family. Katarina trembled as she kept speaking.

"Camilla, you wouldn't abandon us, would you? If we lost both of our daughters like this, how could we go on...!?"

"You are a daughter of House Storm. You will never have to go through hardship again. I'll make sure that you'll have everything you could ever need. And I'm sure that we can help the House of Montchat in some way. Therefore..."

"No."

Before Patrick could once again beg for his daughter's forgiveness, Alois brusquely cut him off.

Alois didn't wear his usual calm expression anymore. There wasn't even a shadow of his usual gentle smile. His face was cold and hard as he looked at Patrick and Katarina.

"That won't be necessary at all. Camilla, I have no use for the power of the Storm family."

Alois reached out his hand again. Camilla was puzzled by this side of Alois that she hadn't seen before. She had never heard such a cold voice coming out of that kind mouth of his. Even during the times that she and Alois had quarrelled, there had always been an undertone of genuine care.

"Let's go. Throw away the name 'Storm'. You're already a part of the Montchat family."

Camilla looked between Alois and her parents.

Don't go, Patrick's eyes said. I love you, said Katarina's. You're the only one. Our only daughter. Therese's sobs filled the silence between Camilla and her parents.

But, they didn't take a single look back at Therese, who was still sunken to the ground. Therese was a villainess after all, who supported a criminal and framed Camilla. A girl who had brought shame on the Storm name.

They didn't need a daughter like that. In the same way they once hadn't needed Camilla.

"Father, mother."

Camilla threw off the two hands that clung to her. She remembered what Therese had said when she arrived in the royal capital.

She was right. This kind of thing would just repeat itself over and over again. She didn't feel an ounce of heartache as she cast them aside.

"...Are you going to abandon your daughter once again?"

As their daughter threw aside their hands and asked them that, the two of them looked at her in stunned silence. They probably didn't realize straight away that they would never hold their daughter's hands again.

"Abandon?"

They didn't know what she meant. The two of them loved their daughters. Camilla and Therese both, they had loved them since the day they were born.

"We never abandoned you. What an awful thing to say...! You're the one who is abandoning us, are you not...!?"

Patrick looked aghast. It was as if he couldn't believe what Camilla had said at all. How could they ever abandon their beloved daughter? They had brought her up with the greatest of care.

Yet, despite everything, their daughters never understood that at all. As parents, it was terribly sad.

"Why don't you understand, even though we love you so much!?"

Patrick's grievous cry echoed through the courtroom. Certainly, some kind-hearted people would sympathize with that pitiable sound. As parents themselves, they must have known what that would feel like. They felt sorry for them.

Perhaps, Camilla might even be described as an 'awful daughter' in the rumours once again. The same would be said about Therese. Two terrible daughters, who betrayed their parents' love. The Count and Countess would be pitied as the two poor parents, who suffered from their daughters' heartlessness.

They would forever wallow in that sympathy. And their two beloved daughters would never return to their side.

Camilla shook her head.

She was fine with that. Let them call Camilla cold and heartless if they want. A despicable daughter who didn't return her parents' love. Maybe, in time, they might come to call her a villainess again.

– But, I do not care at all!

Containing that angry yell in her heart, Camilla raised her head.

She didn't care what they said about her. She wouldn't regret the choices she made.

A number of hands had reached out to Camilla. But, Camilla knew exactly which hand she wanted to take.

So, as usual, Camilla puffed out her chest with pride and raised her chin.

"So long, father, mother. Take care."

With a determined voice, Camilla turned on her heel with those words, walking away from both of them for good.

"Wait just a second! You aren't leaving me behind this time!"

Just before Alois and Camilla could leave the courtroom together, Diana caught up with them with a shout.

Camilla smiled, realizing that Diana had run up to them the very moment she had made her decision.

She really was like Camilla's big sister, someone who knew her far better than her father and mother ever could.

To Camilla, Diana was certainly someone she could truly call family.

“Lord Alois... Lord Alois! Wait just a moment, please!”

Just how many times had Camilla called out to Alois, who marched quickly in front of her?

Ever since leaving the courtroom, Alois hadn't let go of Camilla's hand even once as they walked. They walked through the streets of the capital, towards the northernmost gate. That was where Eckhart had said their carriage would be prepared.

Even though the trial had started around noon, Camilla had lost track of time in all the tumult. The sun was already beginning to set. As the fading sun still shone down on the streets of the royal capital, a chill night air began to creep through its alleys, scattering the flowers that had been set up in celebration.

At that time of day, there were few people heading towards the city gates. As Alois had already lead her away from the center of the city, there were scarce few people on the streets and the buildings weren't quite as packed together.

“Lord Alois!”

Alois finally came to a halt as her voice echoed through the silent street. He finally let go of her hand that he had been gripping so tightly, she had begun to feel a twinge of pain.

“Just what is wrong with you, Lord Alois!? This isn't like you at all!”

Not listening to Camilla's words, not trying to be gentle with her, not matching his pace to her own, it wasn't like the Alois she knew at all. The fact that he didn't even spare a thought for Diana, who was finding it hard to keep up with them, was also very unlike Alois.

Now that she thought about it, he had been acting strange ever since he laid eyes on Camilla's parents back in the courtroom.

“Are you angry? I'll have you know, I'm not bothered by such a thing at all!”

“...I'm sorry, Camilla.”

Alois looked slightly hesitant as he turned to look back at Camilla. His expression was an unsightly mixture of shame and stubbornness.

“I was cruel to your parents in front of so many people.”

“You said nothing that I would call cruel at all! In the first place, Lord Alois, you didn't say anything, I decided to say those things myself!”

Camilla wasn't a little girl anymore. She was past the age where she lived in fear of her parents. If she was angry with them, if she couldn't forgive them, if she didn't want to acknowledge them anymore... As she was now, Camilla would say exactly what was on her mind.

There was no need for Alois to regret what had happened on Camilla's behalf.

“I know that.”

Alois' face twisted bitterly. As if he couldn't hold it back any longer, he spat the words out.

"But, it was making *me* so angry!"

Camilla was slightly taken aback by how strong Alois' voice suddenly sounded.

He wasn't angry for her sake, but for his own. He was so angry that he had forgotten his usual calm demeanour in public, humiliated her parents and half dragged Camilla out of the courtroom and down the street by her hand.

"I've shown you something strange, haven't I..."

"No, not at all..."

As Alois' eyes were cast downward in shame, Camilla shook her head. She silently looked at Alois' face for a few moments, which was a mess of conflicting emotions.

Alois wasn't the type of person to get angry like that.

He didn't let his strong feelings show so obviously.

He was always calm, keeping his emotions under control. Whether in joy or sadness, smiles or tears, he had always suppressed his own feelings and put others first.

"Lord Alois."

A 'good boy', who never lost his temper and always thought of others first.

Camilla had known that side of Alois.

"You've finally learned to be selfish, haven't you?"

Alois frowned slightly. He looked slightly uncomfortable as he met Camilla's gaze.

As he stared back at Camilla, who had been gazing at him the whole time, Alois spoke quietly, as if he were slightly embarrassed.

"That's because of you."

"Fu... fufu... fuhahahaha!"

Just why was it that those words of all things set off her laughter?

It really was strange.

All that bitterness, pain and loss... it felt like a heavy burden had suddenly been lifted off her back. Relief rolled over her like a breaking wave. Instead of losing everything, Camilla had gained a new way forward, one that she had chosen herself.

She laughed and laughed and laughed, until she could feel tears at the corner of her eyes.

"Camilla...?"

When she heard Alois' anxious voice, Camilla caught her breath and wiped the tears away. It was the first time she had been unwittingly brought to tears like that. During all the hard and sad times she had endured before, she had always just grit her teeth and endured it.

"I'm sorry. I just really am relieved."

She knew just how strange she must have seemed. But, she really was relieved that Alois had come. Perhaps Camilla really had been more scared than she herself knew. But, that strong front she had been putting up was now unravelling because of Alois.

It was at that moment Camilla realized she could cry all she liked.

"Thank you very much, Lord Alois. I'm glad you came."

Camilla laughed again, as she kept wiping away the tears. Maybe it was too early to feel completely safe, but things were definitely better now. She didn't have to steel herself any longer.

"...Camilla."

Alois simply gazed at her, as Camilla smiled and laughed through her tears.

He tried to stammer out words, but after taking a deep breath, he looked at the ground. Then, slowly raised his hand, looking slightly uneasy.

"Just once more... can I say something selfish?"

"Yes?"

"Though this time, it's a question for you."

Camilla didn't understand what Alois meant straight away.

Alois looked straight at her. Compared to the first time they had met, his body was lean now. He was still toweringly tall, his silver coloured hair flowing in the evening wind. As the sun continued to dip, his long shadow stretched down the street. The owner of that shadow gently touched Camilla's cheek.

There wasn't a trace of that rough and pudgy skin anymore. Those thick hands had become slim and shapely. There wasn't anything left of the features that earned him the nickname of the Toad of the Swamp.

"Was I able to become someone that you could approve of?"

That handsome face of his looked at Camilla anxiously. Those emotional red eyes of his glinted with a hint of desire. It was the face of a man who couldn't hide his feelings anymore, a face of his that Camilla had never known.

Camilla understood what his question meant.

She almost pulled back on instinct.

As Camilla inched backwards ever so slightly, Alois' eyebrows twitched. If she pulled back and rejected him now, just how badly would he be hurt?

But, even so, Camilla was determined to say what was on her mind.

“I... I am not going to accept you just because I know that you’re Julian now!”

She wasn’t going to fall in love with someone just because they were Julian. She wouldn’t approve of him just because he was Julian.

“I’ll do it because you’re Alois.”

She raised a hand to her cheek, giving his hand a squeeze. Even if her cheeks were flushed, or her eyes were still red, Camilla didn’t look away from Alois for a second.

“Who you really are doesn’t matter to me. Your face or your body... don’t matter either... of course, do not misunderstand, I prefer you this way! But, that’s not what’s important!”

If Alois began to put on weight again, Camilla would definitely put in every effort to slim him down again. But, that’s right. The only person that she’d want to whip into shape and make lose weight was Alois. He was the only one.

She kept speaking without stopping to think. Did she even know what she was trying to say anymore? She felt an odd sweat begin to form on her forehead. She could hear her heart pounding in her chest, her face begin to flush, and her vision starting to shimmer.

“The year that I spent together with you, Lord Alois... I didn’t hate it at all!”

Camilla fell in love with the man they called the Toad of the Swamp. She got angry with him, argued with him, travelled with him and eventually took his hand.

They laughed and cried together as they grew closer. They had come this far side by side. Always together with Alois.

“I know.”

Alois smiled. In the orange glow of the setting sun, that happy smile was more fair and charming than any she had ever seen.

Then, he drew closer to Camilla. As the sun ebbed away, the cold winds began to rustle more and more.

The celebratory flowers danced on the breeze. As the spring winds swept towards the north, the petals were dyed the same colour as the sky.

Camilla looked slightly puzzled as Alois came even closer. She wasn’t disgusted, though. In fact, she was surely happy. But, she didn’t realize what he was about to do.

Taking advantage of her confusion, Alois closed his eyes as he pulled Camilla close, kissing her with all that he had.

Epilogue

“...Oh, they’re back.”

It was barely after dawn. From the window of the Montchat manor in the capital of Mohnton, he saw a carriage he didn’t recognize.

Just as had been reported by the men guarding the border, it was a carriage bearing the royal crest.

As Klaus muttered that to himself, Nicole and Günter who happened to be nearby, raised their heads. They raced to the open window and leaned outside.

“God damn, it’s true! Heeeey!”

Günter waved vigorously, but of course the people in the carriage a little while down the road didn’t notice him.

“Missstresssss! Lord Aloiiiiis!!”

Nicole also yelled as loudly as she could next to him. As he sighed at the two idiots screaming out the window, he noticed that the other servants nearby were already beginning to whisper to each other with big smiles on their faces.

Within minutes, the entire mansion was buzzing with activity.

○

Despite the brisk southerly wind tinged with miasma, Camilla and Alois were greeted outside by all the mansion’s servants.

Alongside the smiling servants, several soldiers also saluted their return. Some of the maids couldn’t help but whisper to each other happily, whilst the cooks wondered just what kind of feast was in order. Everyone’s faces were bright.

“Mistresssss!”

Nicole pushed her way through the circle of people surrounding them and ran straight into Camilla, who had barely stepped off the carriage.

“I-I’m so glad that you’re okaaaaay...!!”

Camilla didn’t know what to say to Nicole, who bawled as she clung to her. As she gently stroked her head, she looked around at all the others.

Camilla looked at them all slightly incredulously. This was hardly the welcome she expected under the circumstances.

“What about the revolt? Is there still fighting going on? The Meyerheim and Ende families are in revolt, are they not!?”

After nearly losing her life in the royal capital, returning to this felt like a major anticlimax. She almost felt as if there was something shady going on.

“Ah, right, that. Nah, nothing of the sort. It’s all wrapped up!”

As Camilla looked this way and that, she suddenly heard a frivolous sounding voice behind her. Camilla was startled by that sudden familiar voice.

“Klaus! What on earth are you doing here!?”

The Lörriich family were supposed to be in open rebellion against Alois. When she looked around more, she suddenly spotted two familiar faces in the group of soldiers. Two strong-looking men, with chestnut brown hair...

“Theo!? Leon!? Why are you not in Einst!?”

As Camilla looked at them in complete shock, Leon tried to keep a serious face whilst Theo just winked.

“Just what is all this...?”

“Apparently, the two of you are pretty popular. You managed to win over more than half of Mohnton to your side, and now that they’re all alone, Falsch surrendered. We got that message this morning.”

Camilla could only breathe as she looked at Klaus, mouth agape. Her thoughts couldn’t catch up with what was being said. The three major noble houses of Mohnton rose up in rebellion, just how could that have all changed so quickly?

What’s more, Falsch had surrendered. Was it a coincidence that it happened the morning Alois and Camilla had returned?

– No.

It couldn’t be a coincidence, could it? As Camilla returned from the royal capital, they must have known the fate of the true heir to the title of Duke Montchat. With the loss of their master, they had also lost their reason to fight on.

“All’s well that ends well, right! We’re gonna have a celebration! You came back at just the right time!”

Pushing past Klaus, Günter beamed at her. Indicating just who would be in charge of the feast, he flexed his arms.

Then, he glanced behind Camilla.

“What the, I’ve never seen her before?”

Günter gazed at Diana, who made absolutely certain she would go with Camilla this time. It looked as if Günter was slightly stunned by her appearance.

“She’s a beauty, ain’t she...?”

“At least those eyes of yours aren’t painted on, then.”

With a fearless laugh, she stepped forward, but only to Camilla’s side as she tapped on her shoulder.

“You really did get to live in a place like this, huh?”

Diana smiled as she cast a sidelong glance at Camilla. Then, still smiling, she looked around at the people surrounding Camilla. She looked at Günter and Klaus, then finally to Nicole, whose hairs stood on end like a cornered animal as she jumped backwards.

“J-Just who are you?”

“I’m Diana. I suppose you could say I’m Camilla’s personal maid, or something like that.”

“Maid!? I-I am the Mistress’ maid!”

“Oh, that’s right. I’ve heard a lot about the little puppy that she picked up!”

“Puppy...!?”

Nicole yelled, her face full of indignation.

Klaus couldn’t hold back his laughter. Günter smiled and tried to reassure Nicole, which only drew the laughter of the cooks who didn’t think that role suited him at all. The laughter was contagious, and before anyone knew it, it had spread to everyone.

Camilla, meanwhile, watched silently.

It really was a strange scene. Günter from the Brandt family, Klaus from the Lörriich family, Nicole from the Ende family and Theo and Leon from the Meyerheim family. What’s more, all of them alongside people from the capital. People from all over Mohnton had gathered here. Even after hundreds of years, they all still gathered for the Montchat family.

Even though they weren’t here, there were certainly lots of other people who had done everything they could. It was all so strange, but... she was happy.

“Camilla.”

As she watched, Alois stood beside her. He also watched alongside her, without getting into the middle of what was quickly becoming a celebration.

“Camilla, I’ve gained all sorts of important things in this land. I’ve met a lot of people. People I became friends with, people who respected me.”

“Lord Alois?”

“People who made sure I had a place to come back to. People who waited for me to return. I also met you and eventually came to know you. That’s why...”

Alois smiled as he looked ahead. The air that pricked at his skin was still colder than the winds in the royal capital. It was a land where miasma travelled on the air throughout the year, and in the winter the ground would be covered in snow. Every time the wind blew, Alois’ skin reacted painfully.

But, even so...

“I love this land. And, I love you. This place is yours as well.”

Camilla looked back up at Alois. Alois, too, stared back at Camilla. At some point, they had taken each other's hands.

Not everything had been cleanly solved. Not everything had been achieved without sacrifice. There was also still resistance to Alois.

But, as she took Alois' strong hands, Camilla felt like they couldn't lose. No matter what happened in the future, they would be able to overcome anything together.

"I want to protect the things that I love. Camilla... I want to do that by your side, forever."

The wind blew and the clouds wisped overhead. Laughter echoed through the air. The morning light of the sun was dazzlingly bright. It almost shone on the wind itself.

Mohnton, which was once a land of shadows, was illuminated by the light of the dawn.

Fin

The Capital; One Month Later (1)

Springtime in the royal capital was much warmer than in the frigid northern expanses of Mohnton.

They arrived just as the waning weeks of spring arrived, with the flowers truly in full bloom. Under that deep blue sky, as singing birds sung with spirit on flowering trees, only a month ago everyone would have anticipated such a festive atmosphere to accompany the celebrations of Prince Julian's wedding.

But, it wasn't as if the capital was in a gloomy mood now. People had reacted well to the news of the capture of the ringleaders of the traitorous plot to take over the kingdom.

An investigation was still ongoing to see just who had been assisting both the traitors in the capital and their allied rebels in Mohnton, but that was something that would take years to fully wrap up.

In the meantime, however, the most popular figure of discussion was none other than Alois Montchat, who was being hailed as one of the key people credited with putting down the plot. Now that the fraudulent man posing as Prince Julian had been locked away to await his fate, Duke Alois who had been revealed to be the real Julian now found himself being pulled in two directions.

Alois himself had stated that he only ever wants to remain 'Alois' and continue living in Mohnton, but there are a sizeable number of people who wish for him to once again be 'Julian'. Whilst the First Prince Eckhart respects Alois will to remain himself, he still steadfastly maintains that he would like Alois to become a sort of 'Julian' when it comes to providing assistance in matters of state. People seemed impatient for a decision to be made, with many people still trying to jostle for influence over the argument one way or another.

– But, well, I suppose there's no helping talking it over until a compromise can be made?

Camilla looked around at the unfamiliar parlour as she let out a small sigh.

With a view towards the south, this guestroom that oversaw the courtyard was the finest one the Royal Palace had to offer. Of course, the Montchat mansion back in Mohnton wasn't shabby, but it paled in comparison to the splendour on show here. From the size of the room, to the intricately made furniture, all the way down to the fluffy softness of the seats. But, despite being surrounded by such finery, Camilla couldn't quite feel at ease.

"Sorry about all this, Camilla. For you having to come along with me, I mean."

Alois, sitting opposite Camilla, looked genuinely apologetic.

"We barely had time to settle back down in Mohnton before... you must be tired, right?"

"There was no helping it, after all. It was at the request of His Highness, Prince Eckhart."

As she looked back at him, Camilla remembered just how it was that they came to be here in the first place.

It was about a month after Camilla had returned to Mohnton after all the turmoil in the royal capital.

Although they had rushed back as fast as they could because of the rebellion still ongoing in Mohnton, they found that things had almost been completely settled by the time they got there. Many people had taken up arms for Alois' cause or switched to his side, with the now isolated Falsch soldiers surrendering. Not long after, Vilmer who had been leading the rebellion, was captured.

The soldiers that Eckhart had sent along with Alois ended up being completely unnecessary and were eventually sent home. Everything seemed like it was going swimmingly.

Everyone who had performed meritorious deeds were rewarded and investigations launched into bringing to light the truth of the rebellion. Of course, Alois also began to make a tour of inspection of the duchy, assessing just how much damage had been done. When his soldiers had returned back and Eckhart learned that the rebellion in Mohnton had been put down without further incident, he sent word for Alois to return to the royal capital.

As for Camilla, she understood Eckhart's intentions. The royal capital was the most important place in the country and Alois was quickly becoming one of the country's foremost figures. It was absolutely necessary for him to come and discuss crucial matters of state in person.

What's more, the emergency in Mohnton had ended. Wrapping up the rest of the matters there could be done without Alois' direct involvement. Besides, it wasn't as if Alois was being ordered to return immediately. Perhaps as a sign of good faith as well as his own feelings, Eckhart had given them a grace period of about a month to return.

But, still, they really hadn't had time to settle back down. It took that long for Alois to assess the events and damages of the rebellion through reports, set out a framework for what needed to be done in his absence and prepare for the journey... with Camilla in tow.

"After everything that's happened, my brother was concerned about how you were doing as well, Camilla, so he asked me to bring you along. You were the one who suffered the most from all this, after all."

"I think that particular honour should go to you, Lord Alois."

Though as she said that, Camilla thought to herself that maybe this wasn't the sort of thing to compete over. Especially since now, after the dust had settled, Alois and Camilla's reputations had been completely flipped on their heads

Camilla, who just over a month ago was probably the most detested person in the country, had become a tragic heroine overnight. Every time she saw her name printed as part of an attention-grabbing headline in a newspaper, Camilla thunderously glared in disgust. It was as if she and Liselotte had swapped places from where they had been a little over a year ago.

Much the same was true for Alois. Although he was once reviled as the 'Toad of the Swamp', a man no one would come near even on the rare occasions he did leave his boggy lair, now there were so many people clamouring for his attention that he couldn't deal with them all. Of course, now that the fat had been burned away and those royal features were on full display, the girls flocked in droves as well.

When it came to light that Alois and Camilla were not yet married, some noblemen even came to offer him their very willing daughters' hands in marriage.

– Everyone is all too eager to make hay now!

Camilla herself had been repulsed by Alois in the past, never truly wanting to marry him. But, that was then, this was now. In a burst of anger, she suddenly stood up.

– Well, I suppose I can't deny that he's definitely become handsome.

Alois, who had lost enough weight that he wouldn't look too out of place with other young noblemen, had become quite fetching, even in Camilla's eyes. Along with those royal features, his face was neat and handsome, whilst also looking much healthier than before. There was no puffy skin hiding away those mystical red eyes anymore.

He still stood very tall but was much leaner than he once was. Camilla oftentimes found herself craning her neck to look at him. But, she never felt intimidated by that height of his. Those soft and warm red eyes always helped to give him a gentle impression. Even after coming to the capital city, they hadn't needed to bring any of the ointment with them since his skin had already become smooth... however...

“...Lord Alois.”

Camilla stared at him. Alois fell captive to her stern look.

“Lord Alois, are you sure that you're not the one who is exhausted? You really don't look too good.”

Despite his skin looking healthier, she could see the shadows beginning to form under his eyes. Despite Camilla's stare, he didn't break his smile, although he averted his gaze ever so slightly.

However, Alois shook his head.

“I'm fine.”

“Do you even know what 'fine' means?”

Camilla frowned at his response. Despite everything that happened, Alois was still Alois, after all. He cared deeply about others, but seemed to care little for his own health.

“Are you sleeping properly? Are you eating enough? Or, rather, are you eating too much?”

“Ah, no, no.”

As Camilla began questioning him, Alois quickly shook his head even more.

“I'm eating and sleeping normally, there are no problems. My brother has been taking care of everything for us, after all.”

“Hmph,” Camilla's frown only deepened. Just as Alois said, Eckhart had looked after both of them incredibly well. No, rather, instead of Camilla and the others, it should be said that Alois had been given especially intent care.

Perhaps this was the way the older brother wanted to express his feelings to his younger, who had gone through so much hardship. Eckhart paid extreme attention to every minute detail of Alois' stay in the

capital, making sure he would never want for anything. Camilla, of course, was treated well, but there was definitely a difference in the sense of gravitas afforded to Alois.

It's no wonder, after all. Camilla herself fully understood why. But, with how little she saw of him between all the meetings Alois attended with Eckhart and other high ranking noblemen and ministers, she felt herself getting more and more frustrated. Often times, when Eckhart wished to talk to his brother alone, Camilla was left to her own devices.

Camilla, who had never had a brother, couldn't even imagine what the two of them were getting up to. She'd never gotten along with Therese like that once they'd grown older, after all.

Since it was Eckhart, surely his time with Alois would be nothing like how Therese and Camilla constantly butted heads. Eckhart was a caring person, behind that stern face of his. Their talks were probably kind, if a little stuffy and boring.

– But, maybe...

"Lord Alois, are you not getting worn out?"

When Camilla asked that, Alois shifted in his seat unconsciously. But, Camilla didn't miss that movement. She continued to stare straight at Alois, who looked away uncomfortably.

After a moment of this one-sided staredown, Alois finally relented as he spoke with a sigh.

"...A little, but you shouldn't be worried over just this much."

Alois slowly looked around the room. The beautiful decorations and furnishings that lavished the place stood in stark contrast to the rustic simplicity back home in Mohnton.

"I just really can't get used to this place, after all. That, along with there being so many people who want to talk to me, it's a little hard to catch my breath."

"I see."

"I suppose a change of pace would be nice? But, well, because of everything that's happened, it would be hard even just to have a peaceful walk outside."

Right now, Alois was the biggest celebrity in the royal capital. Any noblemen they meet would try to incessantly rub shoulders with them and any journalists wouldn't let him escape without giving them some fresh materials, and that's not even counting the horde of fawning girls that could appear as if out of thin air. If it wasn't properly hidden, that unique royal silver hair of his would always attract attention wherever it went.

Alois himself surely never imagined that days like this would ever come. For most of his life, most of everyone had kept their distance, and if he were to look their way they would very quickly avert their eyes.

"...Well, I'm just a little tired, that's all. I'll get used to it."

Alois gave Camilla a smile to try and reassure her. But, Camilla's stern expression didn't change at all. She still looked at Alois bitterly.

– How can I believe you when you look like that...!?

“Lord Alois, what are your plans for today?”

“For now, I’m free until dinner, but...”

The way he said ‘for now’ was a problem. What was supposed to be Alois’ free time very rarely ended up actually being so. Eckhart, as well as the other nobles, often aimed to get a word in with him during this supposed free time of his. If they stayed in that room, just who knows when someone would come asking for an audience.

But, if they went outside, he would undoubtedly attract even more attention. It was fairly safe to trust the nobles and servants in the highly guarded royal palace, but who knows just who you could encounter out on the streets.

– But, the weather really is perfect for a walk.

The warm spring sun sat high in the sky and the softest of breezes tickled the petals of the newly bloomed flowers around town. It couldn’t compare to the sea of flowers that covered Blume, but the royal capital was nevertheless awash in them. The fresh air outside was much more refreshing than the air back in Mohnton, in no small part due to the lack of miasma.

– What’s more...

With a clench of her fist, Camilla stamped her foot.

“Lord Alois, let’s go and have a ‘change of pace’!”

“...I’m sorry?”

“We need to get ready, so I’ll call Diana right away!”

When she heard that Camilla was going to the royal capital, Diana made sure that she was brought along. Nicole was also determined to go along as well, but Camilla managed to convince her that Diana should go instead since she was familiar with the workings of the royal capital already.

So, although she felt bad for Nicole, Diana really was the best fit for this trip. Part of that was, because whilst Nicole didn’t have a mischievous bone in her body, Diana was much more of a ‘bad girl’.

“There’s somewhere I definitely want to show you by all means, so just wait here quietly for a moment!”

As the stunned Alois nodded silently, Camilla left the room in a hurry.

○

After a while, Camilla returned to the parlour alongside Diana.

As Diana walked in behind her, she carried a large suitcase.

When she popped it open, Alois saw that it was full of clothes. Clothes for both men and women were packed tightly together, without any rhyme or reason.

“I’ve heard all the details!”

Diana raised her voice cheerfully. She was always energetic, but Alois saw that she was even more buoyant than usual.

“The long-awaited ‘change of pace’, huh? Alright, just leave it to me!”

Alois felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

He was like a frog being stared down by a snake.

Just what on earth were they going to do to him...?

The Capital; One Month Later (2)

The royal capital was all hustle and bustle.

Shops lined both sides of the boulevards as carriages rattled down the street. The loud voices of peddlers hawking their wares or trying to drive foot traffic into one shop or another echoed into the midday sky.

“...Come to think of it, Lord Alois, couldn’t you have just changed your appearance with magic?”

As they passed through the busy streets, Camilla looked up at Alois with a frown. The embarrassment from having completely forgotten about that was plain to see on her face.

“Don’t be an idiot, I wouldn’t have had half as much fun if we did that.”

Diana made a light jab at Camilla as she walked beside her. As she and Camilla strolled side by side in their cheap-looking clothing, she looked up at Alois as well.

“Besides, half the excitement is wondering whether or not someone will find you out.”

“You really are a bad girl, aren’t you?”

Camilla looked flabbergasted as Diana grinned. Alois still felt a little restless as he watched the two of them talk.

– Just what is going on?

To his eyes, it was like both of them had transformed into normal common girls. All the gorgeous dresses and expensive finery that distinguished nobility and their close servants had disappeared, replaced by simple shirts and skirts. Even the way they’d done up their hair had been taken down several notches of complexity and they had only used a bare modicum of makeup. Of course, Camilla didn’t suddenly adjust her well-practised manner of walking or change the way she talked, but unless you looked really closely it would be impossible to tell that she was a noble.

What’s more, Camilla’s face was bright and happy, despite her words. That villainess from the rumours seemed like something from a distant memory as she strolled down the sidewalk next to him.

Of course, the Alois who was with them was not quite his usual self either.

He wore a patched shirt and hempen trousers, along with tough but breathable leather shoes. To complete the outfit, his characteristic hair was hidden under a wide-brimmed hat.

He’d never really paid much attention to fashion before, but this was the first time he’d worn truly modest clothing like this. He couldn’t quite feel comfortable wearing this sort of clothing that he’d never tried on before.

What’s more, Camilla had suddenly taken him out into public with these kinds of clothes on. He was wondering just what people would think of him, but to his surprise, not a single person seemed to be paying attention. As he was bewildered by the whole thing, time flew and eventually they found themselves in the centre of the royal capital.

Camilla didn't seem to share any of his restlessness as she looked through the display window of a store. Diana seemed like this was second nature to her. When she went inside to have a look at something, the store clerk treated Camilla as if she were just any regular customer as well. Alois felt like he was the only sane one in this topsy-turvy world.

"...Camilla? When you lived in the capital, did you always do things like this?"

When Alois whispered that to her, the corners of Camilla's mouth curled upward.

"Oh my, afraid of being found out?"

"If people found out, things might get worse. What's more, going out without a guard, you're defenceless..."

"You don't need to worry about such a thing. Because, no one is really going to suspect that a noble would walk outside like thi- Ah, there it is! The flour!"

"Flour?"

As Alois asked that, Camilla dashed away from him. Racing in front of the grocery store she spotted, she looked at the bags of flour for a while, then picked up the biggest one she could handle. She quickly paid for it, then pushed it into Alois' arms without waiting to hear a protestation. After making sure that Alois had a good grip on it, she flashed him a mischevious smile.

"I have a few more things I need to buy, so be prepared. Diana... have you seen any eggs?"

"They should be in the back, right? Honestly... you're making something again, aren't you? Well, whatever, so long as everyone's happy."

As Alois stood there in stunned silence with the sack of flour in his hands, he watched Camilla and Diana disappear into the back of the grocery store together. His mind couldn't quite keep up with what was going on.

She had said that, for a 'change of pace', they should have a walk around town. Unlike the slightly stuffy palace, there was something liberating about the fresh air of the city outside. If it weren't for the fact that they had snuck out of the castle in disguises like they were some kind of thieves, he might have been able to enjoy himself.

What's more, the sack of flour... Alois looked puzzled as he looked at the sack in his hands.

Just what on earth did Camilla bring Alois out to do, exactly?

"...Ouch!"

Suddenly, he heard a high pitched voice. In the same moment, he felt something soft bump against his back. Alois, who had been lost in thought, dropped the sack of flour he was holding in surprise.

As he looked behind him, he saw a girl who had fallen back onto her behind. She looked like an ordinary town girl, but there was something in her appearance that caught Alois' eye.

There was a magical tool around that girl's neck. The tool, which was large enough that it had to be held with two hands to operate, was the so-called 'camera' that had become outrageously popular in the

past few years. The tool was cube-shaped and worked by burning a sight through a pinhole lens onto a piece of paper. Because they're a relatively new and expensive item, it was strange to see it in the hands of normal common girl like this. The only two people he could think of that would possess one were wealthy hobbyists... or reporters.

"Sorry about that, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

She quickly scrambled to her feet, giving Alois an embarrassed smile. Straight after, he heard a gruff voice echo down the street at her.

"Oi! Don't laze about! There are rumours floatin' around that famous Julian is walking the streets right now! We gotta find him 'fore the competition does!"

"Alright, alright! I got it already!"

The girl yelled back at him in much the same way as the man ran down the opposite side of the boulevard. Then, with a quick movement, she grabbed the dropped flour and pushed it back into Alois' hands.

"Uh, basically, sorry 'bout that! Here, your stuff."

After pressing the flour back onto him, she gave him a wave and dashed off. Whilst staring at the flour in his hands again, Alois slightly readjusted his hat.

– That was surprising, I wasn't found out...?

Even though another person had looked right at him like that. He felt a smile tug at his lips, but Alois straightened his face out straight away. For a moment there, he felt himself getting sucked into Diana's idea of 'fun'.

– No, no, I can't. None of this is even necessary, much less fun.

More importantly, if it was discovered that he was out in the town, there would be an uproar. Getting caught by the reporters would cause no end of bothersome trouble. What's more, it wouldn't just be a mere bother if some remnants of the recent rebellion caught wind of it and plotted to do something.

He really ought to return to the castle with Camilla after all. Although Alois didn't know exactly what she was up to with this escapade, it really was far too dangerous for her to walk around without a guard like this.

– I should be able to use magic to defend myself, but...

"We found them! Sorry to keep you waiting."

Camilla's sudden voice broke Alois out of his thoughts.

As he looked up, he saw Camilla carrying what she'd picked up as she walked alongside Diana. It wasn't just eggs that she held in her hands either. There was an assortment of butter, nuts and fruits as well.

"Camilla, I'm sorry for saying this after we've already gone out, but-"

“Now then, let’s get going, Lord Alois.”

Cutting off his words, she joined her arm with his without hesitation. As Diana took care of the other goods, she seemed to be almost buzzing with delight as she steered Alois down the street. Alois couldn’t bring himself to stop her as he felt like she was dragging him along.

“Camilla...”

As he tried to say something, she craned her neck to look up at him. But, that bold smile of hers forced him to swallow his words.

“It’s alright. I won’t take up too much of your time. It’s far too nice of a day to spend it cooped up in the palace, regardless.”

Alois was sure she knew what he wanted to say.

She knew, but she still was determined to take Alois somewhere.

“...Just where exactly are you taking me?”

Camilla grinned at Alois’ question.

“My secret spot!”

“Secret... spot?”

Camilla nodded, that grin only getting wider. It was fearless and bright... like a child thinking up a trick.

As she kept smiling happily, she pulled Alois’ arm on even harder.

“You’ll understand when we get there!”

There was no way Alois could go against her as he was already swept up in her rhythm, underneath that clear blue sky.

○

Just off the main boulevard, there was a building next to a large church.

At first glance, the two-story stone building looked like a large townhouse.

But, as soon as they entered through the front door, Camilla was suddenly surrounded by children who stared at her in astonishment.

“Ahh! Camilla appeared!”

“What the!? She’s still alive!”

“Craaap, you know you’re a celebrity now, right!”

“Watch your mouth! Besides, what do you mean ‘still alive’!? Don’t go writing me off!”

Alois looked on from behind the scene in sheer confusion. Diana, meanwhile, deftly managed to avoid all the children and headed deeper into the house. Perhaps she was dropping off all the things they'd bought.

Thanks to that, none of the children were able to hold her up. Hearing the uproar, though, it seemed like more and more children appeared from deeper within the house.

"This is..."

Alois looked around in wonder as he stepped inside.

The interior of the house was made up of long hallways painted in white, lit by the light of candlesticks mounted to the wall. There were more doors he could count on two hands dotting the hallway, with most of their doors being open already. Looking through one of the open doors, he could see that it had two child-sized beds against opposite walls.

Next to the beds was a little wooden desk, as well as a small chair. On one of the desks, there was a vase of flowers, on the other an open book. And, of course, a child peering out at him curiously through the open door.

"Is this... an orphanage?"

"Yes."

Camilla turned around with a nod at Alois' words.

"I told you about it before, didn't I? This was where I secretly came to cook."

In the royal capital, cooking was considered an unfit hobby for the nobility. So, Camilla often came to this orphanage to practice in secret, sometimes going officially using the excuse of 'charity'.

It wasn't just about cooking, though. She came here when things became too painful or too difficult, and she just couldn't stand it anymore. Camilla had come to this orphanage more times than she could remember. She cooked, played with the children and listened to all their mischevious stories.

It was the place Camilla wanted to protect the most in the entire royal capital.

"Now then, I'm going to borrow the kitchen as per usual! Lead on, kids!"

The Capital; One Month Later (3)

Camilla eventually managed to get the children to lead her onto the kitchen.

Alois, meanwhile, was told to stay in the orphanage's waiting room.

The waiting room was so neatly organized and well maintained that it didn't fit Alois' idea of what an orphanage looked like at all. The cream coloured white walls gave the room a bright yet soft impression. The large windows offered a sunswept view of the church next door. The chairs and tables were noticeably aged, but they looked in good condition. Everything he could see in the room spoke volumes about the orphanage's wealth.

The only person in the waiting room alongside Alois was a single nun. If he had to make a guess at her age, perhaps she was nearing her fifties? As she guided him to the waiting room, the children had called her 'miss', so he assumed she must have been one of the staff here.

When the nun spoke to him, her voice was relaxed, the slight wrinkles either side of her lip stretching as she smiled.

"We sincerely welcome you here. I've heard everything from Lady Camilla. Lord Alois... would you prefer me to address you that way?"

"Yes, that would be fine, thank you... Sorry for suddenly intruding like this."

Alois took off his hat as he spoke. Even when that glittering silver hair of his came into view, her gentle smile didn't crack at all.

"You're more than welcome. It's always like this around here, after all. Please, sit, Diana will be here with a cup of tea shortly."

Alois studied the nun once again once she said Diana's name.

– They're similar.

The energetic Diana and the sage-like nun. They gave off almost the exact opposite impression, but there was something distinctly similar about both of them...

"...Ah."

When the nun noticed Alois gazing at her, he made a voice as he finally realized. Once Alois had taken a seat, she sat opposite him. Maybe it was Alois' imagination, but it almost seemed like she had a slightly different air about her now that he had figured it out.

"My apologies for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Rita Hellner. Yes, as I imagine you've already deduced, Lord Alois... I am also in your debt, since I am Diana's mother."

"Hellner?"

Alois instinctively repeated that familiar name. Hellner, although occupying a low rung on the aristocratic ladder, should by all means still be a noble family.

"Oh my, Diana didn't tell you?"

Rita tilted her head in surprise as Alois shook his head. He'd heard a few stories about Diana from Camilla, mostly from the time when she was young, but he'd never looked into Diana's background. When he accepted her as a servant of the Montchat family, he'd dispensed with the usual requirement of a letter of introduction. Because, even though she was a servant of the Storm family who he had antagonized, he wanted to trust someone that Camilla herself placed so much faith in.

What's more, Diana wasn't exactly the type that talked about herself much. Really, the only certain things he knew about her was that she was a servant to the Storm family and Camilla's long-time maid.

"That girl, always so troublesome," Rita frowned as she said that with a sigh, resting her chin on her hand.

"Hellner is my husband's family name. But, I've been cut off from that family now, so I don't have anything to do with the current Baron Hellner."

"Cut off...? I'm sorry if I'm prying, but what about your husband...?"

"He passed away. More than ten years ago now, it must be. That being said, we were cut off from the main family well before that. It's been over twenty years since my husband and I eloped now."

– Eloped...

Alois almost gasped at how casually she said those words with that calm tone of hers. Becoming the lover of a nobleman's son, eloping and being cut off. From that alone, he was able to glean the gist of their circumstances as mother and daughter.

"We became commoners overnight, and not affluent ones either. Of course, we never regretted eloping, but when we were at a loss as to what to do, it was Count Storm who helped us. Since he had my husband's friend from childhood, he hired both of us together."

Alois couldn't hold back the frown when he heard the name Storm, being immediately reminded of Camilla's parents who he himself had played a part in cutting away from their daughter.

At that time, he was determined to take Camilla's hand and bring her along, severing the relationship between her and her parents. He still didn't regret that spur of the moment decision he made, but he could never quite get rid of that worming doubt that burrowed its way into his heart.

"Even after my husband died and I left the employ of the Storm family, the Count still supports me. Despite the fact that we don't have any sort of real relationship, he still gives large donations to this church regularly, perhaps as a way of helping the wife of his departed friend."

"...That sort of thing is just that guy trying to show off how 'virtuous' he is to the other nobles."

Just as the door was loudly banged open, Diana's voice also carried into the room. As she stepped inside, she carried a tray with two cups of tea in her hand, not bothering to close the door behind her.

"I'll never forget the attitude of those two. They always talked to dad a bunch, but they never even paid me or mum a glance. After my father died, they basically forced mum into a convent to get rid of a nuisance."

"Diana!"

“Yes, yes, tea.”

Without showing any reaction to Rita’s shout, Diana quickly sat the teacups in front of both of them. Although there didn’t seem to be any elegance in her angry looking movement, she didn’t spill a single drop of tea. Alois couldn’t help but admire whatever well-practiced technique she was using.

“The only reason he donates to the orphanage is for the sake of his image. ‘The Count of Storm is honouring his dearly departed friend by sending money to his commoner wife’, just by using some chump change he can spin such a nice little story. They’ve always been like that. It’s always just been about how they can make themselves look good. They just judge people based on who is useful and who isn’t. Whether that’s a commoner, a daughter of a commoner... or even their own kid, right?”

As she held the tray to her chest, Diana cast Alois a meaningful glance. ‘Their own kid’, it was clear she meant Camilla

“That’s why they sent you away, mum. But because I started to teach that girl how to cook and she got attached to me, I wasn’t.”

“Diana! Watch your tongue!”

“I’m not going to grovel at the feet of people like them. That goodness of theirs only runs skin deep. But, despite how hollow everything they do is, we’re still supposed to think of them as ‘good people’? If it wasn’t for Camilla, I’d have quit working at that house of theirs a long time ago.”

Diana still didn’t pay any mind to Rita’s increasingly annoyed voice. As she shook her head, she suddenly looked Rita’s way as if she had suddenly remembered something.

“Oh, speaking of which, Camilla was asking after something. There’s not enough charcoal to get a fire going.”

“Just changing the topic again as always... Charcoal, is it? I’ll go and get some, but be prepared for a tongue lashing later young lady!”

After glancing at Diana, Rita bowed to Alois before leaving the room, closing the door behind her.

Alois watched her leave silently.

The only thing he could think about was what Diana had said about the Storm family just before.

– Polishing their skin-deep reputation as ‘good people’. Only judging people on their value to them. No one realizing their true nature. Perhaps not even themselves...

On the day of the trial, he had seen Count and Countess Storm attempt to appeal to Camilla. He was furious. Using force, he had pulled Camilla away from them. Neither he nor they would ever forget that moment.

But, it wasn’t just anger that Alois held in his heart when he thought of them.

As much as he hated it, he also understood them on some level, perhaps even sympathized. Alois knew all too well just how they lived. Both he and they had lived lies, deceiving themselves and becoming wrapped up in fake personas just to keep going.

Until only recently, he had been just the same as them. It was because of that understanding that he couldn't completely remove that pang of guilt.

"...Lord Alois?"

Noticing how silent Alois had fallen, Diana called out to him. Not being able to stand those eyes staring at him any longer, Alois finally broke his silence.

"...I did it too."

As he stared ahead at the wall, not being able to face her, Alois mumbled softly. He became all too aware suddenly of what kind of a place he was in. It reminded him too much of Grenze.

"I did it too, since I donated to an orphanage like this."

"What?"

"I wanted people to see me as a 'good lord'... No, at the time, I don't think I was even fully aware of just what I was doing myself."

It wasn't just the orphanage in Grenze. The way he originally treated Camilla smacked of the exact same hypocrisy of Count and Countess Storm. The real reason he had taken Camilla in was to appear benevolent, and ultimately he deeply hurt her as a result.

In truth, Alois thought, he had no right to hurl any blame at the Storm family. If he couldn't forgive them, then just how could Alois forgive himself? But, because of his own selfishness, Alois had still torn Camilla away from her parents.

"...You're so God damn uptight, you know that?"

A harsh voice rang out above Alois' head. When he looked up in surprise, the only thing he could see was Diana frowning down at him, her arms crossed.

"Don't think that people like you or them are some kind of rare breed. People can't help but do things like that sometimes."

"But..."

"I hope I'm wrong, but is the reason you've been looking so worse for wear lately is that you've been feeling guilty towards Camilla? Wondering if you really had the right to stay with her or something?"

He couldn't say anything to refute her. Alois found himself uncomfortable and speechless as Diana glared down at him thunderously.

"Lord Alois. You regret the things that you've done, right?"

Alois didn't answer her. He didn't know just how to answer that.

For the ten years that he was the Duke of Mohnton, Alois strived to become a good lord, but in reality, he often trampled on the feelings of others time and time again. He was almost calculating as he unintentionally tallied up the actions he should take to cultivate his image. He knew better than anyone just how horrendous a hypocrite he was.

But, could he really draw a line between himself and Camilla's parents?

On that day, Alois had sought to throw down the Storm family as much as he could out of anger.

As Alois remained silent, Diana sat where Rita had been just before and shook her head. After she took a sip of the tea that she had brought herself, she spoke freely.

"...I hate to admit it, but I can't deny that there are people who were saved by them."

Diana sounded exceptionally bitter. He could tell just from her voice that even this damning praise was tough for her to say. She didn't want to do it, but somehow she knew those were the words Alois needed to hear.

"My dad and mum got jobs and the orphanage also got donations. Money is money, and it's how its used that's important to the person receiving it. If it weren't for those donations, this orphanage wouldn't survive as is. So, I mean, for every one person like me who sees them for what they really are, there'll be ten people who say 'thank you' and really mean it. Because, if that money lets them eat another day and see another sunrise, then it's hard to see the person who gave it to them as anything but a benefactor."

Diana, not being one of those people, took a sip of tea.

"No matter how hard you try, there are times when you just can't dig yourself out of a hole. Camilla coming to the orphanage and interacting with the children was a much more heartfelt gesture than the donations from the Storm family, but in the end, it's the latter that kept these kids fed and clothed. That's why mum has always been grateful to the Storm family, as you could see for yourself."

Diana shrugged nonchalantly as she looked at the door her mother had left through.

"The Storm family... both the Count and Countess. Even though she knows what that money really means. To her, they're still the people who helped when she had nothing. So... even if everyone else came to hate the Storm family, I don't think my mother ever could. If it weren't for their donations, just who knows where'd she'd be right now, right?"

"...So that's how it is?"

"That's how it is. No matter how good you are, there'll always be those who dislike you. But, even if that goodness is just a veil of hypocrisy, so long as the deeds are still 'good', it makes it hard to be truly disliked."

Alois looked down. He stared at his own face that shimmered in his cup of tea for a while. Through his guilt, a thought rose to the surface.

The Count and Countess Storm have people who admire them. Likewise, as a Lord, Alois had people who looked up to him as well. Even if it was hypocritical, was it okay to accept it?

"Those people, and you too Lord Alois, you're not villains. Thanks to what you've done, the truth is that people did end up getting saved, right? Then, you should be proud of what you've done. Just accept the praise, even if other people might hawk some spit at you."

Alois breathed a sigh at Diana's words. She really was blunt. The only way someone might be able to figure out who was master and servant in this conversation was the fact that Diana still called Alois 'Lord'.

He wondered just how much Camilla's sometimes sharp tongue was inherited from Diana. She really was a bad influence on Camilla from the very start, wasn't she?

But, regardless, she was an important friend to her as well.

"In Camilla's eyes, you're her salvation, Lord Alois. So, it's fine. You shouldn't be so arrogant as to expect to wrap up everything neatly and tidily with a perfect bow."

"That's... right, huh?"

Alois grimaced as he raised his head. He didn't think that he'd be able to deal with it as boldly as Diana was encouraging him to, but when it came to that pang in his chest, he felt as if perhaps he'd patched over the hole just a little bit.

He regretted the days he spent wearing the mask of a 'good lord', when he was still completely under the influence of his parents' curse. But, it wasn't as if it was all bad. He regretted everything he had done that hurt Camilla. But, it was because they moved past them together that Alois and Camilla could be the people they were now.

Alois was, in a way, a saviour to a lot of people. Likewise, if Count and Countess Storm cared to look, they would find a lot of people who earnestly believe in them with all their hearts.

"Well, even if I say all that, I still despise them."

"Yeah."

It was impossible to be universally liked, after all. There was no way to choose a path that would satisfy everyone. He would shoulder those regrets and accept the scorn, whilst continuing to still move forward. So long as he had his own saviour by his side.

Alois smiled wryly as he finally took a sip of that tea that held his reflection. It tasted different from the days where his tea was filled with sugar. It had a subtle and slightly bitter flavour, but it tasted much more authentic.

"Thank you very much."

"Nah, it was nothing."

With everything wrapped up, Diana's mouth began to curve upwards...

But, as it did, the door flew open with the sound of children's happy shouts.

As well as the wafting smell of freshly baked cookies.

The Capital; One Month Later (4) – Final

The first person who stepped through the door was Camilla, carrying a wooden plate in her hands, as well as a group of children following hot on her heels.

No, actually, it would be more accurate to say they were almost clinging to her heels, they were that close. As they reached out to Camilla, she kept swaying the tray from side to side to keep it away from their hands.

“Camilla, just one more, please can I have one moooooore...?”

“Did you not hear me!? No means no! Besides, just how many did you eat already!?”

“Big sis, can I bake some more cookies with the leftover dough? Miss can light the cooking fire.”

“Yes, yes. You can do whatever you like with the leftovers. But make sure to listen to what your teacher tells you to do, alright? Definitely do not touch the fire without her permission, alright!?”

“I gotta pee...”

“Ah, quickly, go then!”

As she gave the young boy a push on the back and urged him out of the room, Camilla suddenly jerked her face upward as if she finally realized something. She noticed Alois looking straight at her.

With an embarrassed frown on her face, she straightened up and strode straight over to Alois, showing him the wooden plate that she held.

On it was a smattering of misshapen biscuits that were moulded by the children themselves. It didn't look like they had been cooked evenly all the way through, and some of them even showed the slightest signs of burning.

“Camilla, these are...?”

“They're for you. I can't quite get them right yet, but if I don't have you try them at least once, Lord Alois, I don't feel like I'll get anywhere.”

As she said that, Camilla sat down next to Alois. When one of the more bold children reached out to try and swipe one of the biscuits, she gave his hand a light slap.

“These are for Lord Alois. You've already had your share, haven't you?”

“They're for me...?”

Camilla nodded. She stuck out her chest proudly like usual, but there was something ever so bashful in her expression.

“...I've been worried about just what to do about it, I suppose. Since it's for Lord Alois, after all.”

Camilla couldn't look at Alois dead on as she frowned at him out of the corners of her eyes. Her brow wrinkled as she struggled to keep a straight face. For a moment, Alois thought that she was annoyed about something, but then he realized her expression meant something else entirely.

“Today is *Lord Alois' birthday*, is it not?”

Alois blinked in surprise.

It was spring. 'Alois' and 'Julian' were born nearly on the same exact day. However, 'Alois' was a few days older.

The town wasn't preparing for 'his' birthday. There was still a big celebration being planned, but that was for 'Julian', the Prince. Eckhart was planning a celebration in the palace, and the town officials had their own plans for a festival. It would be hard for them to leave the city anytime soon with the big celebrations being planned for the birthday of 'Prince Julian'.

Because of that, it seemed like the existence of 'Alois' had all but been forgotten. Even Alois himself had forgotten about it. Camilla was the only one on the capital who seemed to remember his false birthday, from his false life.

As Alois stared at her in wonder, Camilla began to look increasingly frustrated as she sighed softly. She still frowned as she turned to look at Alois properly.

"Lord Alois, you do remember, don't you? That once spring came... once you turned twenty-four, you wanted to officially become engaged."

".....Ah."

"What do you mean by 'ah'!?"

Camilla turned around in her seat and glared up at Alois. Alois was a little taken aback as he looked down at her.

Those piercing black eyes of hers looked at Alois like he was a mortal enemy. She bit her lip to try and swallow back her embarrassment as her cheeks began to turn a light shade of crimson.

"You can't tell me that you seriously forgot!? You're the one who said it in the first place!"

Alois couldn't immediately answer Camilla's outburst. He couldn't be honest and say that he forgot. If he did, she would only boil over even more.

It's just that, there were so many things that had happened since then.

What's more... he thought to himself if this was just him being arrogant, but he wondered if it was even necessary to hear her answer anymore.

"Well, I can't pretend that holding off on answering for so long was proper of me either, but... but, well, it's something I have to answer properly after all. I need to give you an honest answer."

With every word she said, Camilla's brow wrinkled even more. Her body trembled slightly as she gripped her hands into fists. But, she wasn't angry.

Alois had heard from Günter that she had been spending a long time practicing making cookies back in Mohnton. She'd made dough countless times and had baked an untold amount of cookies, giving all the results of her experiments to the servants.

But, Alois was the one person she had never given any to. The only time he had tasted them was when Nicole had brought him some after Camilla had been taken to the capital.

“Camilla.”

When Alois called her name, she pursed her lips as if she really was angry. He slightly averted his eyes as if he were trying to escape as she glared at him.

“I... I hate leaving things all wishy-washy like this. Besides, if I can’t even give you a proper answer after everything that’s happened, it would be really vexing!”

Standing up, she put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. As if challenging him, she looked down at Alois.

“Lord Alois, I accept your offer. Be prepared, by the time we get married, I’ll definitely be much better at making sweets than even Klaus is!”

“Yeah... I’m looking forward to it.”

Alois didn’t try to stop the smile that spread to his lips. Just as she glared down at him, he smiled back at her.

Camilla really was arrogant and self-confident... as well as determined and bright. Even if Alois was the type to stay in place, she would always take his hand and lead him on.

“Thank you very much, Camilla... Can I try some?”

“Of course. I made them for you, after all.”

As Camilla sat back down, Alois reached out and took a biscuit from that plate.

That soft taste was immediately nostalgic. A long time ago, he received cookies just like them from a girl whose name he didn’t know... and later on, he tasted cookies just like them from an orphanage in Grenze.

Both are nostalgic memories for the current Alois. The taste of Grenze, that was supposed to have been part of that hypocritical mask of his, was an irreplaceable part of himself now.

“Lord Alois, how was it? I’m sure that it’s really no good at all right now, but soon I’ll be able to... Hey!”

Her words were cut off as Camilla once again had to slap the hand of the same boy who tried to reach up and sneak a cookie from under the table. But, she reacted too late. Just as she stopped one hand, three other children attacked from the other side and swiped some of the cookies.

“Ehehe, Camilla is gonna get married! The scary lady is gonna become the scary wife!”

“What are you talking about!?”

“Miss Camilla... you aren’t going to come here anymore...?”

“W-what are you saying...!? ...Ah, jeez, don’t cry! I’ll definitely come by to play once in a while, okay!?”

“Blehheh! You don’t need to come anymore here anymore! Just shaddup and go away!”

“Watch your mouth!!”

The last of the biscuits were soon swiped away as Camilla began to chase after the children again.

Diana, still sitting across from Alois, smirked as she watched Camilla, lightly playing with the biscuit she held between her fingers.

“Congratulations and all that, huh?”

Diana cast Alois a sidelong glance as her smirk widened, before taking a bite of that cookie.

Those happy voices echoed through the room, as they surrounded Camilla, running circles around her and clinging to her dress. To say that he enjoyed the sight wouldn't even be doing his thoughts justice.

Alois wished he could watch for hours. He wanted to come back here many times, just like she promised.

He hoped that he could spend the rest of his days by Camilla's side.

But, unfortunately, that first wish of his was destroyed almost immediately.

“...Lady Camilla, Lord Alois! T-There's trouble!”

Rita suddenly burst into the room. She must have been in the kitchen, since she was still wearing an apron, but she looked at Alois and Camilla in a panic.

“There's suddenly a horde of reports outside of the orphanage... Someone must have leaked to them that you were here!”

Alois and Camilla looked at each other. It wasn't just a case of getting wrapped up in a fuss anymore. Even the children were stunned into silence by how serious Rita looked.

“They've already completely surrounded the front gate. You should quickly go out the back entrance and escape through the church grounds! Diana, show them the way!”

“Got it. Come on you two, we're escaping through the church!”

As Diana stood up she urged Alois and Camilla to follow her. Alois nodded, quickly donning his hat again as he followed after Diana.

“Bye byeeee!”

“Seeya later!”

The children waved at Alois and Camilla as they left.

They knew that they'd come back again someday. Both this orphanage and lots of other places besides.

○

It was a good idea to escape through the back entrance and onto the church grounds.

But, just as they were relieved about avoiding the worst of the crowd, they were suddenly confronted by a familiar looking female reporter.

“Heh heh, only a fool would’ve expected you to come out through the front door.”

That girl with the camera was the same one who had run into Alois in town earlier. When Alois saw her giving him a cheerful smile, he grimaced bitterly. It was possible that she really did notice who he was back then, after all.

If he were using magic, they would never have been found out like this. Because even if he was wearing a disguise, his face still remained the same. If someone took a close look at him, they’d be able to see through him.

“Sorry about interrupting your date, but there’s just so many things I’ve got to ask you, right? About your life as a doppelganger and the dark history of the Montchat family. Well, not that we’re going to have much alone time.”

As she said that, the reporter motioned behind her with a thumb. As if on queue, they began to see other reporters emerging onto the grounds.

Diana wondered if they could make it back inside the church. As the amount of reporters grew by the second, she frowned and glanced back at the church. But, she couldn’t immediately decide to go back, since there would be no escape route after that.

Camilla stood stiff, still not having decided where to escape to. But, this was Camilla, after all, so she’d eventually make a rash decision and take off.

Alois tried to think about just what kind of choice Camilla would make. If he were her...

...She wouldn’t look back.

Before Camilla could make a decision, Alois grabbed her hand. Alois saw his reflection in her surprised eyes.

“We’re getting out of here, Camilla.”

With those words, Alois pulled Camilla along with him. The female reporter raised her voice in annoyance as the two of them began to run. Diana, meanwhile, did her best to get in her way.

The reporters who had begun to gather started to give chase. But, despite being chased, Alois’ legs felt lighter than ever. Rushing out of the church grounds, they made it onto the street.

Passers-by looked stunned as the two of them ran past, with some maybe figuring out who the disguised pair being chased by the reporters were.

If Alois used magic, they’d have been able to escape in an instant.

But... just like Diana said, that wouldn’t be as fun.

“Lord Alois!”

Camilla, who was still trailing slightly behind Alois as he held her hand, called out to him. Alois looked back at Camilla, not stopping at all.

“Camilla!”

Camilla looked genuinely confused as to just what had come over him. He couldn’t quite describe it himself, either. Usually, it was always Camilla leading him on, with Alois being the one lagging behind her.

“After we get back to Mohnton, would you like to go sightseeing again?”

“Lord Alois, is this really the right time to be...!?”

“Let’s visit all the towns again. We have to say hello to everyone, after all. There’s the capital, Grenze, Einst and Blume. Of course, we should visit Falsch as well. So, Camilla... would you like to go on a jaunt with me?”

Camilla stared at him, stunned. Then, after a quick frown, she lowered her head and gave her cheek a couple of light slaps.

When she raised her head to look at him again, she was wearing that familiar bold smile that was only fitting for a villainess. With a ‘hmpf’, she exhaled through her nose as she looked Alois over, proud of just who he had become.

“Goodness gracious, there’s no helping then, is there?”

But, that bold and villainous smile changed once again. She closed her eyes for a moment as her mouth twitched in a way that she couldn’t stop, and then...

At last, she couldn’t hold it in anymore, as Camilla started to laugh.

“Alright then! I’ll keep you company wherever you’d like to go!”

Camilla squeezed the hand that held hers. Her voice that echoed through those sunny streets was dazzlingly bright.

As they ran with their backs to the sun, she couldn’t stop laughing.

It was a breathtakingly beautiful scene.

A slightly chill wind that signaled spring’s end spurred them on from behind. As the flowers of the town were swept up in that tailwind, they nestled in Camilla’s hair and blew Alois’ hat off his head.

When he saw people look on in shock at his silver hair as they raced by, Alois couldn’t hold back his laughter either. That hair of his, the same colour as the waxing moon, glittered in the light of the sun.

The Path of the Dead (1)

Julian sat up in his bed, his head leaning back against the wall.

High on the opposite wall, out of reach, was a lone barred window. On another wall, a heavy wooden door only had a single small window to the dark hall outside, also covered by thick iron bars. The last wall was made up of featureless stone.

“After all...”

As he gazed at the wall, Julian muttered to himself.

“Playing you off as a ‘tragic heroine’ was a bridge too far, huh?”

“What’s with that!?”

From the other side of the wall behind him, there was a muffled retort. As that voice bit back at him, Julian smiled faintly.

“It didn’t really fit you at all.”

“Nonsense! I played the part perfectly, didn’t I? Meek, emotional and innocent... was there ever such a perfect lady as me? I was really popular, you know?”

“Just imagine if they had learned what you were really like.”

Julian let out a small laugh. He couldn’t see her, but he could imagine the pout on her face as he said that.

“Do you still remember it? The first time we met.”

“This old story again...!?”

She sounded grumpy. Well, she never was a fan of this story.

“You climbed up a tree in our garden and threw a caterpillar at me. What kind of lady does that?”

“I was only five years old at the time, though!?”

“And after I dove to catch you when you fell, you actually offered me another caterpillar as a thank you present. It wasn’t even the same kind of caterpillar, were you hoarding them?”

“That was over ten years ago now, you know? Back then, I was a little...”

“I never thought that the girl from back then would ever become my mage.”

Julian closed his eyes. He still remembered those days as a child in Mohnton.

The nostalgic sensation of miasma on the wind, the memories of his parents who were still alive back then. When the major families that were vassals to his father visited constantly, there was one girl who left an impression on him.

They never got to spend a lot of time together. But, still, she came to love Julian. And for Julian, an only child, she was like a real sister to him.

"I really was shocked when I heard your name, you know? To think that caterpillar obsessed girl would be playing such a pivotal role in the royal palace."

"...I did my best."

Her voice sounded defiant.

"I worked really hard to see you again, Lord Alois. So I studied magic and etiquette a lot."

"It feels like it's been a long time since you've called me by that name."

"Well, it's just now we're alone... Ah, sorry. I think I hear someone coming. Be quiet for a moment."

The voice on the other side of the wall suddenly took a serious tone. Even though Julian strained his ears, he couldn't hear anything. He couldn't hear the sound of a door opening, either.

– Are they coming to interrogate us again?

Looking up at the dark and featureless ceiling, Julian sighed.

The royal family, which has based their rule on peace and benevolence for many years, would want to do their best to avoid appearing harsh. So, for now, they were only being questioned. But, sooner or later, a decision would have to be made.

It was quiet on the other side of the wall. The room he sat in was also deathly quiet.

But, somehow, he knew that they didn't have long left.

○

"Hey."

"Jeez, what is it? I was trying to sleep."

With a yawn, a tired voice came from the other side of the wall.

"You sure can sleep well, considering everything..."

"A magician's body is her best asset, after all, so I've got to look after it... That being said, it seems like there's some kind of seal on this room."

Julian muttered in agreement. She probably didn't hear that, though. The walls were thick enough that even if they were pressing their ears against them, they could only barely make out what the other person was saying. If he didn't speak clearly, his words would be lost to this barren room.

"You really are a full-fledged mage, aren't you?"

"What are you talking about now?"

"It's just, if someone told me you'd become one back then, I'd never have believed them."

Back during those caterpillar days. Julian would always remember that little girl who followed him around the garden.

“I’m quite good though, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, I was still no match for *the real thing*, though. That was just foul play, really.”

He heard a sarcastic laugh. Although he could hear her laugh, he knew that she wasn’t smiling.

“I just wasn’t a match for him at all...”

It felt like she was talking to herself, but her voice still carried.

“It’s so unfair it had to be those two. Pitting the real against the fake like that. But, if I... if I was a better mage, then maybe I wouldn’t have let you down like that, Lord Alois-”

“Stop.”

As her voice grew darker, Julian stopped her.

“Don’t blame yourself. You’re the best magician in the history of the Ende family. That’s why I trusted you, after all.”

“Lord Alois...”

The truth was, her abilities really were incredible. There was no one better the Montchat family could have chosen to realize their wish.

Julian knew that he was the one to blame. That girl who constantly followed him around whom he thought would be a useful pawn... he had completely underestimated Camilla Storm. Not taking on the hit to his reputation that executing her back then would have incurred was his biggest mistake, considering it ultimately lead to their ruin.

Because of that decision, both she and Julian were now in this situation. The people who pledged themselves to the Montchat cause were probably facing a similar fate as well.

– Despite being the head of the family, I...

“Lord Alois.”

He heard a slam on the wall behind him. As he jumped in surprise, his thoughts trailed off.

“Lord Alois, I love you.”

“...Why this, all of a sudden?”

“No, no reason in particular. It just came to mind.”

She laughed on the other side of the wall. Julian, meanwhile, crossed his arms and sighed.

“You know, I really did my best, Lord Alois.”

“...Yeah.”

Julian frowned as he answered her curtly.

The laughter on the other side of the wall didn't stop for some time.

○

“Have you heard anything about Vilmer and the rest?”

When Julian called out to her, there was a reply straight away.

“I have... It seems like everyone was captured.”

Although he could only rely on that voice as a source, Julian nodded dourly. Despite knowing how the land of Mohnton as he knew it had come to an end, all he could do was stew in regret in this cold cell. He gripped both his hands into fists, but those dark feelings of helplessness only crept further into his mind.

“It seems like most of Mohnton has gone over to that man. It seems he's not just happy being a prince, he's got to take that too.”

The land where he was born and raised, along with all those vassals whom he was close with, had been taken away by that man.

The name of Alois, the name of Julian and now even the Montchat family itself, everything had been taken away by that ugly man.

He raised that fist in anger, but there was nothing for him to bring it down on.

It was several hundred years ago when his ancestor was unjustly robbed of the royal throne and exiled to the swamp along with his most trusted friends. But, now, everything that they had worked to build in that swampy land had been lost as well. And, Julian knew that the fault rested on him.

“...Will they resent me?”

As that fist he clenched fell limp, Julian sighed.

“Gerda and Vilmer did their best as well. I wonder if all those who followed me will come to hate me because I failed so miserably?”

“Lord Alois?”

“And you too...?”

His words fell heavily. But, he couldn't keep them back.

Julian stared down at his hand. The hand that had carried the weight of so many people's hopes now looked so utterly powerless.

“If you hadn't been by my side, you would have never ended up like this. They'd never be calling you a criminal or my accomplice.”

The other side of the wall was silent. Julian had no idea just what she was thinking.

He didn't want to hear these words either. But, it was as if some unseen force was drawing them from his mouth.

"The only reason I was born was for revenge. It was decided right after I was born that I was to be swapped with the Prince, so I was always prepared for it. I don't regret what I did to the royal family. What I did was nothing compared to what they put the Montchat family through."

Julian didn't consider himself to be a villain. He had stood on a century-old mountain of blood, sweat and tears. All for the sake of revenge on the royal family. If he turned his back on all that and regretted his actions now, it would be spitting on the memory of all those that came before him.

"...But, still..."

How pathetic, he thought to himself. Even though he wasn't supposed to have any regrets...

"...I regret that you got wrapped up in all of this. I dragged you down the same bloody path that I'm walking down... and now I'm dragging you down into this pit with me."

If it weren't for Julian, Liselotte could have lived a happy life back in Mohnton. Because of her personality, she might have even gone over to help those *real people*. At any rate, if she hadn't have been lashed to his wheel, then she would have had a future.

But, now she had no future. Gerda and the others had been captured, and the entire grand conspiracy had become known to all. All that remained for them was to count the hours until the time came. The time when they would both feel the chill of steel against their necks.

"Lord Alois. Are you seriously saying that now?"

"Isn't it only natural?"

When Julian answered her, he heard an exaggerated sigh from the other side of the wall. He somehow was able to hear it clearly. Deliberately.

"Haven't I always been telling you? I came here because I wanted to. Because I wanted to meet you again, Lord Alois, that's the reason I studied magic and how to be a lady of the court."

Just like how that caterpillar girl had cocooned into a lady, the girl he considered his sister had become his fake lover. Although she sounded angry with him, there was something happy in the words she spoke.

"I didn't just get dragged along. I knew just what kind of path we'd be walking from the beginning. I wanted to become your shadow. It was what I always wanted... Lord Alois, when you were in pain, or when it was too much to bear, I wanted to be there to support you."

"...That's how it was, huh?"

Julian closed his eyes. In the darkness, he imagined her face on the other side of that wall.

The girl he had met in Mohnton wasn't a prim and proper young lady at all. With her soft golden hair and mischievous red eyes. Wearing that pale dress, she was always so bright and happy.

“I was just happy to be by your side, Lord Alois. When we got engaged, I spent so long choosing a dress for the wedding... I knew it wouldn’t be a real wedding, just two actors in costume putting on a play, but it really did feel like we were going to get married... There was no way I was going to give that up to anyone else! So, I don’t regret anything.”

“Yeah...”

“But, next time... if we can meet again in another life, we’ll definitely go through with the wedding properly! You better not forget, okay!?”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s fine, we’ll do it.”

“It’s a promise, alright! You absolutely have to-!”

“I got it, I got it. We’ll do it just like you said.”

Julian rubbed his forehead. That badgering attitude of hers hadn’t changed from when she was a child at all. Even though he was disgusted with himself, he found a smile spreading to his lips.

“You’ll want to have it in spring again, right? And the same dress, with the same bouquet of white flowers? Honestly...”

He remembered it all well. Even if it was only a farce, he knew just how much she was looking forward to that ‘wedding’... he remembered the big smile she had on her face.

But, just maybe... Julian’s face wasn’t so different after all.

“Well, I’ll be going to hell before I get any chance at reincarnation... Hey?”

There was no reply. It was strange for her to be so quiet suddenly after they’d been talking all this time.

“What’s wrong? Hey?”

Julian’s voice merely echoed in that dark room before seeping away.

“Liselotte...?”

Silence.

“Liselotte... Liese? Liese, are you there? Liese...?”

The Path of the Dead (2)

Camilla was speechless after hearing the end of Alois' report.

Spring had come to an end, with the summer winds now blowing through Montchat. The incident of the rebellion had all but been settled completely now, and peace had returned to the Montchat mansion.

The political trips Alois was having to make to the royal capital were becoming less and less frequent, with the number of reports coming in from various parts of Mohnton also having been halved.

Whenever Alois was away, Klaus would travel up from Blume to act on his behalf as Duke, and the reporters skulking around the front gates looking for a scoop would disperse for a time.

From now on, they should be able to peacefully look after Mohnton... were Camilla's thoughts, just before Alois visited her room.

"...I can't believe it."

Looking up at Alois, who sat opposite her, Camilla finally managed to force herself to speak. She found herself simply shaking her head in disbelief as well.

There was a trembling in her fingertips. Even the breath that passed over her lips felt painful. Just what was it that she was truly feeling? Camilla didn't know how to describe it.

But, the shock had taken its toll on her.

"It's too unbelievable. You're saying that... Prince Julian and Liselotte were... murdered in prison? That's... such a thing..."

"But, their bodies definitely were found. My brother confirmed it himself, so it's hard to think there has been any mistake."

"Still...!"

As she instinctively stood up from her chair, Camilla denied it.

Of course, there shouldn't be any mistake in the report coming from the royal capital. She knew that, but still she couldn't accept the words Alois had just told her.

"Such a thing shouldn't be possible...! Because what you're saying is that Gerda killed those two!?"

"...That part of the investigation hasn't been confirmed yet."

Alois tried to stay calm for her sake. He frowned slightly as he gripped his knees, seeming to chew over every word before saying them.

"Prince Julian... or rather, the real 'Alois'... his body, along with Liselotte's, were definitely found in their individual cells, there's no doubt about that. What's more, both Gerda and one of the guards went missing on the same night. She was very cooperative with the investigators, and even denounced 'Alois' multiple times when she was being questioned. Saying that she 'chose the wrong master', and how much she hated him."

"But, that's..."

“And, although he was supposed to be keeping watch on her, it seemed like the missing guard had become quite close with Gerda as he guarded her cell. Some even said he was going too far in favouring her. The guard was quite old, close to retirement age and unmarried... because he had been serving a long time, he was able to give her quite flexible treatment... These are the facts of the case.”

Hearing the words from Alois made it very easy to construct a picture of just what had happened.

Gerda conspired with a prison guard that she had drawn to her side, and used the opportunity to murder ‘Alois’ and his companion, who she held a deep grudge against. After that, the two of them escaped. It was an easy to understand tale.

Camilla chewed her lips as she paced back and forth, biting back her words. Just what was the impulse she was feeling? Camilla didn’t know herself. Julian, Liselotte and Gerda... It was as if all the wrong people had been picked for these roles.

“I still can’t believe it... This is *that Gerda* we’re talking about, remember? Everything she ever did... wasn’t it always for the sake of the Montchat family?”

Camilla didn’t like Gerda and Gerda obviously despised Camilla. She’d been furious with Gerda’s rude attitude countless times, and Camilla, as well as Alois, had almost been in deep trouble because of her.

But... it’s because of those times that she knows how deep her loyalty runs. She was the type of person who would prioritize her loyalty to the Montchat family over her own life.

Could such a woman really denounce Julian, then go as far as killing him?

“...Something doesn’t feel right.”

“If I’m going to be honest, I get the same feeling.”

Alois looked up at Camilla as she wrung his hands together.

“So, I’m going to visit the royal capital to confirm things with my own eyes. I’m sorry about this, but the details of the case are still being kept from the public, so could you not talk to anyone about this?”

“...Okay.”

When Camilla finally managed to choke out a reply, she fell back in her seat, the strength had left her legs.

With the shock finally wearing off and giving way to something else, she looked down at the floor. It still didn’t feel real.

They both died. Not even as a measure of justice to atone for their crimes, but at the hands of someone they trusted, someone who had always been faithful to them...

“If I find anything out, I’ll make sure to let you know straight away.”

“...Yes.”

“I’m sure that Gerda still has a grudge against you, and now that she’s escaped... I’ll make sure security is doubly tight. But, for just a while, please be careful if you decide to go out...”

“Yes... you don’t need to concern yourself over me.”

She didn’t want to worry him, so she wouldn’t be reckless. As his fiancée, it was her role to protect the house and everyone in it when Alois was away.

– I have to be strong.

Whether or not Gerda had killed them, things wouldn’t have changed much. Julian and Liselotte were in prison awaiting the day of their execution. They were doppelgangers, traitors and criminals.

The soldiers in the royal capital would certainly catch Gerda, her escape wouldn’t last long at her age. Everything would be settled soon.

– I’m okay... It was just a little shocking to hear...

Curling her hands into fists, Camilla raised her head.

“I’m alright. Please take care on the road. Lord Alois, I leave the investigation of Gerda to you.”

Alois gazed at Camilla’s face in silence for some time.

He blinked slowly and opened his mouth before closing it again and swallowing whatever words died on his tongue, as Camilla couldn’t figure out what lay behind those red eyes of his.

“Is something wrong?”

“Camilla.”

After calling out her name, Alois hesitated. Then, taking a deep breath, he mulled his words over before calling out to Camilla once again.

“...I don’t know much about who you were back when you lived in the royal capital, but...”

“Excuse me?”

When Camilla answered him, Alois averted his eyes slightly. His face seemed troubled and lost for words, but there was also something painful in that expression.

“Camilla, you spent a long time living in the royal capital, didn’t you? And when you were there, the one you were always looking at was always...”

Alois slowly blinked, as Camilla saw his reflection in his eyes.

In those eyes of his, that seemed to be on the verge of tears, Camilla saw herself with the same exact expression.

“It was always... ‘Prince Julian’, wasn’t it?”

She looked at him in silence, as she began to grip her hands so tightly into fists that they began to hurt.

She couldn’t stay calm. Not just now, but from the very moment she had first heard the news from Alois. Even if she sat down or stood up, the feelings boiling inside her that she just couldn’t understand wouldn’t abate.

It wasn’t anger. It wasn’t hatred. She didn’t feel sorry for them either...

...Those two were traitors. Being executed was the sort of end they deserved.

They hadn't just tried to bring Camilla down, but put the entire country under their thumb.

Not just that, but they had brought war to Mohnton.

Even Alois' life had been in danger.

It was only natural that they be punished. Camilla herself could never forgive what they'd done. She didn't feel sorry for them. She had no sympathy at all. Camilla thought that they should face the punishment that they deserve. And, in the end, they had.

"Camilla... It's okay, you don't have to overdo it."

"...Overdo it?"

"I know it's not my place to say this, but... you shouldn't push yourself too hard. More than anyone, you were the one who looked at him the most, didn't you?"

Him. Listening to his words, Camilla bit her lip again.

The image that came to mind was that slender back, that she almost lost her mind chasing in vain when she lived in the royal capital.

No matter what she did, it had never turned around. From the beginning, he had never even looked her way. And it was all because of a misunderstanding that Camilla loved him so deeply.

But, back then, Camilla was serious.

"...He's a criminal."

"That may be true, but..."

Alois showed Camilla an awkward looking smile.

"Let's mourn anyways. It's not such a bad thing to do, after all."

"Mourn...?"

She wasn't angry, she wasn't filled with hate, but she didn't pity him either...

That's right, surely this was...

– I'm sad...?

The hands that she had clenched into fists lost their strength. As Alois looked at her, Camilla felt her hands slowly coming to her face, as if on instinct.

Both Julian and Liselotte were gone.

She covered her face with her hands. The breath she felt on her palms was sticky and hot. Even when she closed her eyes, she could feel the heat building up behind them all the same. Standing up silently, Alois stood by her side.

She felt something wet on the hands that covered her face.

And, in that darkness, Camilla finally realized she was crying.

– Julian...

Even if he was a fake, even if she was being tricked, Camilla had been serious.

She really had loved him.

The Path of the Dead (3) – Final

Placing both her hands on the wall, she rested her ear against it and closed her eyes.

“...Ahh.”

The voice was calm and subdued. People often called that voice of his ‘cold’, but Liselotte had always liked the sound of it.

– Lord Alois...

Liselotte imagined just what he was doing on the other side of this wall. Surely, he had his back turned to her. He’d be folding his arms, leaning back up against the wall and listening to the sound of his own voice with a serious face.

Without the magic to disguise it as silver, his hair must have reverted to that pale white colour that was his own. His eyes must be a murky and brownish sort of red, to distinguish his family’s centuries of separation from the royal house. His skin would be pale, his body much too lean. He could never have known just how much she envied him, when he said that he never gained weight no matter how much he ate.

Just when was it? One day when she called him a white flower, he got so upset. Really, just when was that? Perhaps it was when they were back in Mohnton. Since then, there was a hard ban on ever comparing him to a flower again.

But, to Liselotte, he would always be a flower. Without being able to choose where it sprouted or move to another pasture, an unfortunate and fleeting flower. She only wanted to protect it from the lashing rain and swirling winds, but in the end there was nothing Liselotte could do.

“Next time...”

There wouldn’t be a next time.

She knew that, but that cheery voice still came from her mouth. Liselotte was his shadow. So, until the very end, she had to do what she could to support him.

– What’s more...

“...If we can meet again in another life...”

She wasn’t lying. It wasn’t some sort of trick. In her heart, Liselotte’s words were true.

“We’ll definitely go through with the wedding properly! You better not forget, okay!?”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s fine, we’ll do it.”

“It’s a promise, alright!”

As she pressed her ear against the wall even more, Liselotte poured her heart into her voice. She felt like she could hear a soft sigh on the other side of the wall.

“You absolutely have to-!”

Liselotte swallowed the words that were on the tip of her tongue.

She turned away from the wall, looking at the closed door to her cell... Someone was there.

“...Who is there?”

Silence. Instead, the door opened without a sound.

Liselotte’s eyes widened in shock when she saw who walked into the cell. She almost shouted in surprise but covered her hand with her mouth quickly.

Standing right in front of her was someone she knew well.

A lean woman who was getting on in age. That slender build of hers was like a withered branch, but paradoxically there wasn’t a single sign of weakness anywhere on her. She stood straight, her eyebrows pulled taught, as she looked Liselotte over rigorously.

She was a vassal of the Montchat family, as well as Liselotte and Julian’s childhood teacher...

“...Lady Gerda?”

Liselotte spoke out to her, a note of fear in her voice. Gerda didn’t answer her even with a nod, her expression not changing even a whit. She merely stood silently on the opposite side of the cell, staring at Liselotte.

“W-what happened? How did you unlock the... what about the guard...?”

In Gerda’s right hand, there was a knife. She couldn’t see clearly, but she was dragging something behind her with her left.

“I need your assistance, Liselotte.”

“A-assistance...?”

“I’ll give you the keys. This is the one for Lord Alois’ cell.”

She held them out to her. When she did, Liselotte finally saw what was behind Gerda.

The heavy thing that she dragged behind her with her left hand was a person. A thin-looking man, who must have been even older than Gerda. Was he asleep? He didn’t seem like he was moving at all.

Liselotte held her breath. She couldn’t raise her voice carelessly now. She didn’t completely understand what was happening, but she knew it was something that had to be kept quiet.

Dropping the man to the floor, Gerda strode towards Liselotte and handed her the keys that she had hooked on the end of her finger. Each key on the loop was numbered. It was easy to imagine that they corresponded to the cells.

“There’s still some time before the lookouts are meant to swap shifts. If you escape out the back entrance, no one will be there to stop you. Once you’re out, go to the left. Once you reach the road, you should know where to go from there. The cell doors are numbered based on the keys.”

“The keys... L-Lady Gerda, just how did you...”

“And lastly, here.”

Instead of answering Liselotte's bewildered question, Gerda offered her the handle of the knife in her hand.

This knife, just where did she get it from? As a criminal, Liselotte wasn't allowed a knife to cut her food, in fact she wasn't even afforded the luxury of a fork.

But all the same, Liselotte took the knife that was held out to her. The blade looked sharp and it felt heavy in her hand. This wasn't a cutlery knife, it was something closer to a dagger a soldier would wear on his waist.

"Once you use it, make sure to take it with you. It may end up being of further use. Make sure to have Lord Alois change clothes with him before you do it. I'll stay clothed as I am. Our clothes match as prison uniforms, after all."

"Lady Gerda...?"

"Once you're outside of the cell, there's no magic sealing curse. So long as you aim inside the cell from outside, you can use magic. With that, I think you know what you have to do, but..."

Gerda's eyebrows didn't flinch.

"Make sure to leave the body in the room once you make the stab. Keep in mind that there's an obvious difference in severity between self-inflicted wounds and a wound inflicted in anger. Steel your heart and don't shy away from what you have to do. Also, make a mess of the room so that it seems like there was a struggle. Always keep in mind just how the scene will be perceived by others."

"...You mean to swap them? That man and... Lord Alois...?"

"If they think that he's died in prison, then there won't be any pursuit. So, disguise the corpse with your magic. It was all I could do to match genders, so make sure that the magic is intricately cast."

Liselotte's breath ran shallow.

Disguising a corpse as Alois with the intention of fooling people into thinking he had died in prison, and then helping him escape. With the corpse being a doppelganger for a time, he'd have a lengthy head start on any pursuers. The better the disguise, the more time Alois would have to put distance between himself and the capital.

With Liselotte's ability, even other mages should be fooled by the deception. If the 'real article' hadn't appeared at the trial, they would have all been fooled to the end, after all.

That said, a guard would still have gone missing. For whatever reason, a criminal was murdered in jail, and on the same night, an unrelated guard disappears from his post. Even if they don't notice the disguise straight away, this would raise people's suspicions. In effect, he could potentially only have until they realize a guard is missing before the pursuers would be hot on his tail. He wouldn't have enough time.

But, if he didn't run, the only thing that awaited him was death. Liselotte had no choice

"...I understand. Then, let's go to Lord Alois' cell. At the very least, we have to make sure that Lord Alois survives, even if he's alone."

“No.”

As Liselotte plucked up her determination, Gerda cut her short.

“The people who will have ‘escaped’ are the traitorous servant who bore a grudge against her master as well as the guard who conspired to help her. Two people.”

“Two people...?”

“The woman seduced the guard over to her side and then killed both the master she resented and his lover before escaping. If that is the motive, then it won’t appear so unnatural. There will be two dead bodies. Likewise, two people will escape.”

Liselotte couldn’t comprehend just what she had said straight away. As Liselotte looked at her with confusion, Gerda let out a faint sigh.

“We can’t leave Lord Alois to wander the world alone. In order to escape, he needs your help. Using your magic, you can deceive the eyes of any pursuers.”

“B-But, Lady Gerda... there’s only one body to substitute...?”

“There will be a second.”

Gerda’s words were just as impassive as ever. As if she were just speaking as she usually did. In the same tone that she’d tell a maid her cleaning schedule for the day, she continued to speak to Liselotte.

“Did I not say it earlier? Only the gender matches. So, you’ll have to be very careful with how you cast the magic.”

Just as that thin and frail body paradoxically stood strong, so too did her eyes remain unwavering. The knife in Liselotte’s hand felt all the more heavy.

Gerda alone was the only person in the room who matched that description. After she had handed Liselotte the knife, she had looked her up and down, making sure that their clothes matched.

Simply put, that’s how it was.

“...Are you serious, Lady Gerda?”

Liselotte looked up at Gerda. Even in a situation like this, she stood tall, not a single crack appearing in her expression.

“This is hardly the time for me to make jokes. If you understand what I’m telling you, then please do it quickly.”

“But... but...”

But, there really wasn’t time to argue. Liselotte herself knew that all too well.

Gerda’s plan made sense. It would be better for Alois to have the magically gifted Liselotte by his side than to try and escape alone. There were only prisoners and guards in this jail. It would be difficult to prepare a woman’s corpse. Therefore, they had no choice but to use the only one that was the most readily available.

She understood. Using other people like this, they had been doing it for a long time. Just how many sacrifices had they stood on in order to reach the royal family like they had?

“Lady Gerda, are you truly fine with this...?”

Gerda blinked silently in Liselotte’s direction for a moment. Then, she nodded.

“The only reason my body exists is to fulfill the hopes and dreams of the Montchat family. Whether in revenge or in sin. No matter how many people were betrayed or sacrificed over the years, the fact that the four houses of Mohnton have pledged eternal allegiance to the Montchat family is an immutable fact.”

To that end, she was even willing to lose her life. Willing to be stabbed and disguised in order to conceal the true nature of the murder.

“The only thing that is important to me is the Montchat family. For the sake of the Master of the house, as well as his family. For that reason, I never had a family, never had chil... No, we don’t have time to talk freely like this.”

Closing her mouth, Gerda shook her head softly, not changing her expression. When she looked back again at Liselotte, her face was as stern as ever.

“Lord Alois is the last remaining member of the Montchat family. From now on, you must protect him. Make sure to fulfill his wish... Even if that may not be revenge anymore.”

Liselotte looked at the ground.

She could only breathe.

– Protect Lord Alois...

She was the one who had always wanted to stay by his side, more than anything she had wanted to be the one who supported him the most. If this was the only way she could continue doing that, then Liselotte had no choice other than accepting this.

Liselotte was a shadow and a fake. She had deceived others, lied to their faces and even betrayed them. Just like the original nature of the Montchat family, a shadow in the dark.

“...Lady Gerda, thank you for everything you’ve done.”

As she said that, Liselotte readied the knife. Gerda didn’t move a muscle, waiting silently.

“Both myself, and Lord Alois as well, you taught us so many things. From morning to night, every single day... Lady Gerda, you were always so strict, I was a little scared of you.”

How to win a person’s trust, how to deceive others, how to act in public. As a teacher, Gerda had taught Liselotte everything she knew. When Liselotte’s talents became obvious, she left her parents and studied under Gerda for many years.

Gerda was scary. She never showed kindness, she never let her run away until she had completed her work, and she couldn’t remember just how many times she ended up crying.

“But...”

She knew both of them better than anyone. She was patient, and never gave up on trying to teach them. Even though she often scolded them, she also praised them for their hard work.

“I think I have more memories of being with you than my own parents, Lady Gerda.”

Gerda looked at Liselotte.

Thinking back, Gerda had never averted her eyes from Liselotte at all.

“Liselotte.”

As Liselotte trembled with the knife in her hand, Gerda called out to her. Even in a situation like this, emotion didn’t sway her voice.

“Make sure to do the magic right. Use up all of your power if need be. You’ll deceive them. This time, surely, you’ll defeat *that man*.”

Just as always, that voice of hers was unemotional and unfeeling. Those taught eyebrows and straight back never changed until the very end, like they were inherent parts of herself.

But...

“It’s alright.”

The very edges of her mouth raised ever so slightly. It was too subtle to call it a proper smile.

“There’s no way you won’t win. Because you’re my student, after all.”

But... it was definitely a smile, of sorts.

○

Dusk was beginning to settle outside of the prison.

At the edge of the western sky, the red sun was just barely visible above the horizon. In the east, a half-moon had begun to rise with a dark blue sky.

The wind felt warm on their faces. Summer in the capital was warmer than in Mohnton. As the wind blew, the clouds swirled, covering up both the falling sun and the rising moon. It soon grew darker.

“...Are you alright, Liselotte?”

Julian, dressed in the uniform of a guard, looked back at Liselotte. Quickly wiping something away from her eyes, she forced a smile for his sake.

“There’s no problems, Lord Alois. I’m just a little tired because I used up too much of my magic, that’s all.”

“I see.”

With that answer, the conversation died away.

Julian walked silently. It had been a while since they'd escaped the prison. After getting off the road and fleeing into the woods, they hadn't encountered any signs of pursuit yet.

They may really be able to escape. Once they got rid of their bloodied clothes, they should be difficult to track.

"After all, no matter what path we take, there are always dead bodies along the way, isn't there?"

Looking at his hands, Julian sighed. He'd always been stepping upon the corpses of others to move forward, and now he'd done the same to escape.

After stepping on so many corpses, walking on and on, this is the place he found himself.

Julian found himself with nothing. He couldn't complete his family's revenge, nor could he ever return to Mohnton. He had no idea just where those bloodied feet of his could step next. He was like a bird who had left the nest for the first time.

"...Just what am I supposed to do now?"

He was at a loss as those words fell from his mouth. As he sighed, he looked up at the sky, but he hardly saw it.

Darkness had truly spread across the nightscape now. The moon had been obscured behind the rolling clouds and not a single star could be seen twinkling anywhere.

– Surely, I have to continue our revenge...?

If he didn't... then wouldn't his entire life up until this point be a total waste?

The Montchat family had long since done the dirty work of the royal family in the shadows. Whenever one head of the house died, he passed on his anger and grudge to the next generation, entrusting them with their shared debt.

He couldn't afford to run from it now. It was tantamount to a betrayal of his family's history.

"Lord Alois."

Walking up beside him, Liselotte quietly took Julian's hand in hers. As she looked into Julian's eyes, her smile seemed pained.

"Are you worried?"

Julian didn't answer her. But, Liselotte took that as affirmation.

"Then, shall we... do something terrible?"

"What now? I've already committed so many crimes."

"That's right, but there's still one more. Why don't we commit the worst crime of all?"

"Worse than treason?"

Liselotte nodded. Even through the darkness, he could tell that her smile was genuine.

“Why don’t we run away together?”

“...Liese...?”

“Why don’t we leave this country behind and go somewhere far, far away? If we had to go somewhere, I’ve heard that the weather in the south is lovely. As far away as we can get from Mohnton in the north, as well.”

Julian blinked, stunned. He never expected to hear words like that from Liselotte.

– Run away...?

All the sacrifices that had gotten them to this point, could he just throw them all away like that?

“Don’t be ridiculous, Liese. If we do something like that, just how could we face everyone who died so far? Just what would they have died for?”

Both his father and mother had died for the sake of their revenge. Gerda had also sacrificed her life for Julian. A slew of people whose names he never even knew. The Montchat family stood upon a mountain of corpses that stretched through history. All for the sake of revenge on the royal family.

Julian now stood alone atop that mountain. Even thinking about running away would be a betrayal of what he stood at the summit of.

“There’s no way I could ever be forgiven. Not if I betray all the expectations that had been entrusted in me.”

“Isn’t it fine, even if you’re not forgiven?”

Liselotte laughed. With her hands behind her back and her golden hair flowing down her front, she took a deep breath.

“We’ve always been doing things that could never be forgiven. It’s not as if we’re some kind of saints. Both the path behind us, as well as the path ahead of us, are paved with the blood of the dead.”

No matter which path the Montchat family travels down, it will always be covered in darkness and shadow. They will always walk upon the path of the dead. Even if their revenge succeeded, that wouldn’t wipe their sins clean.

Liselotte gave his hand a light squeeze as she tilted her head.

“We’ve always lived a life where we lied and betrayed everyone we met. Then, just one more betrayal won’t really change anything, will it? So, in the end, can’t we just commit the worst crime of all?”

Julian still couldn’t answer her.

This revenge was something that had been decided before he was even born. His entire life had been dedicated to it. If it was impossible to complete in his generation, it was his duty to entrust it to those that came after him.

“Even if you have to bear their grudges, their disappointment and their hatred, let’s turn our backs on all this, Lord Alois. There was no way we were ever going to be forgiven, after all.”

Escape, go into hiding, and throw it all away. Live on, whilst carrying the burden of their sins in their hearts.

He'd never thought about doing that.

"So, let's just do whatever we like. Whatever wishes you have, Lord Alois, I'll make them come true. Of course, if you decide to keep pursuing revenge on the royal family, I'll follow you until the end."

The night breeze ruffled through Liselotte's hair. He looked down at his hands through the darkness.

They were still stained with blood. But, they had always been, and he'd never regretted it.

Following the wishes of other people, Julian had walked that path. But now, Liselotte was the only one who stood by his side.

Nobody pulled Julian down the path anymore. The path to that revenge was gone, he'd lost the means to fulfill that long-held goal of his family.

– What do I want...?

Julian closed his eyes. He knew that the days ahead would be hard. Whether he decided to continue with his revenge or give it up entirely, he would always be living in the shadows.

It might be a kinder fate to recklessly charge into the royal palace and be put down by the sword. In fact, facing the executioner's axe would have been easier than what lay ahead. If he had lived and died still following the path, then he would never have to consider something as terrible as this.

– What do I wish for...?

Just what did he want to do? He couldn't think of anything.

But, he remembered a promise he made.

White flowers and a white dress. Spring really was a good time for a wedding.

But, spring had passed now, of course.

So, he had to keep on living... for at least one more year.

The Letters Left in the Wastepaper Basket

To my dearest sister,

It has been some time, hasn't it sister? It's Therese. Your cute little sister, Therese.

Are you keeping well? It has already been three months since then. You're still the talk of the town back in the capital.

I wonder just how that feels? I'm sure it must feel nice. Because it really feels like everything has been turned on its head after what happened before, hasn't it?

From an infamous villainess to the fated heroine who overcame her tragic circumstances! I'm sure that you're still smiling about it even now. I wonder if you're having a fun time out in the swamps. Are you still getting along with that ugly toad of a man? You were so reluctant to marry him, but now that he doesn't have too repulsive of a face you fell right into his arms. As expected of my dear sister, you can forget about the past so easily. And I'm sure you'll soon forget all about me as well.

—

To my dearest sister,

Big sister, it's me. Therese. Do you still remember me?

No, I'm sure that I'm not someone worth remembering in your eyes, sister.

Your true sister, I'm sure you don't even recall I exist. That's how you always carry on, isn't it sister? You always chose other people over your own family. Not even knowing just how heartless you can be, you'll carry on with a happy face like there's nothing wrong at all.

I'm sure you won't even remember this letter after reading it.

—

To my dearest sister,

Do you know just what has happened to the Storm and Neumann families?

Now that you're gone, sister

Please spare a thought for us

My dear sister...

What are you doing now?

How are you doing?

Do you still remember me?

Sister

Sister, back then, why did you...

Why did this happen?

Why didn't you stay by my side?

How can I go on living by myself?

Big sister, I don't know what to do anymore

Sister...

My beloved sister...

Please, help me.

Open Letters on Viscount Neumann's Desk

Dear Viscount Philip Neumann,

The weather has been pleasantly cool of late, how has Lord Neumann been spending his days?

We're deeply sorry that this reply comes so belatedly, but things have been dreadfully busy here and I couldn't find the time to write you this letter.

Now then, since you must be a busy man as well, I shall cut straight to the heart of the matter with this letter.

It is in regards to my engagement to your daughter, Miss Therese.

Although we settled the engagement between our two houses last year, considering the current situation regarding my family, as well as the circumstances surrounding Therese presently, I feel that it would be in the best interests of both our houses to annul the matter.

As much as I too wish to support Miss Therese at this time, one must consider that marriage is not simply between the two of us, but affects the entirety of two families. As it stands, not only my parents, but my entire family was against me continuing with this engagement, and there wasn't anything I could do to go against them.

I truly am deeply sorry for the selfish contents of this letter, but I hope that you too can understand my position in all this.

I am sure that one day Miss Therese will find a partner who is much better than I am.

*Yours Sincerely,
Damien Gunther.*

P.S.

My family has already informed Count and Countess Storm, who are still the legal parents of Miss Therese, of this matter.

It was supposed to have been settled with only a letter to them, but I felt that was much too harsh and endeavoured to write to you myself.

I hope that you'll keep this in mind and come to a prudent decision.

Dear Lord Philip Neumann,

Thank you very much for your continued support.

This is Randolph Ardern, from the Ardern Merchant Company.

I am writing today to formally inform you that a decision has been made to discontinue the provision and distribution of products received from the Neumann household considering the current circumstances.

In addition, the Bartolet sheet music composition submitted by Lord Neumann has been rejected in consideration of the aforementioned circumstances.

All products entrusted to us by the Neumann estate will be returned posthaste. Please be aware that, in accordance with our contract, you are obliged to pay half the value of the returned item as recompense.

Further details in regards to invoice and the returns process are attached with this letter.

Thank you for choosing Ardern Merchant Company.

*Yours Sincerely,
Randolph Ardern*

Head of Musical Instrument and Score Distribution for Ardern Merchant Company.

Dear Lord Philip Neumann,

It's me, Richard Bartolet.

I'm deeply sorry that I am late in replying to the letter you sent me the other day.

I've spent this week moving into a boarding home, and was late in receiving your letter.

I'm deeply sorry for not informing you of my move. You seemed dreadfully busy at the time, and I also had my own circumstances so I had to prioritize certain things over others.

In fact, during our period of not being in contact, I was approached by a patron who asked me if I would like to compose a piece for them, and I am greatly indebted to their kindness. I had refused him once before, citing that I was still indebted to your patronage, Lord Neumann, but by chance we spoke once more.

Lord Neumann, when I had no name and couldn't sell a single silver's worth of music, it was you who saved me at that time. I truly was anxious about accepting this offer, but I am sure that you also appreciate the desire to live up to the expectations of someone who believes in what you can do.

I'm truly sorry that I am only reporting this to you now, after I have already accepted the offer. But, considering the current circumstances of House Neumann, I don't know when I would be able to compose a new piece to sell, and I wish to aim as high as I can with my music. The person who approached me has connections with the capital's orchestral and operatic companies and promised me that I could achieve new heights by working with him.

I want to become a first-rate composer, I want to hear people hum my songs in the street. I'm sure that Lord Neumann can understand my feelings.

I will no longer be a nuisance for you, Lord Neumann, and since it may cause trouble with my current employer, you don't need to send a reply to this letter. Once again, thank you deeply for all that you've done for me.

Yours,
Richard Bartolet.

To my dear friend, Philip Neumann,

Hey, Philip, it's Joachim. I'm writing today as a representative of the Joachim Kean Store.

I'm sure you can already guess what I'm about to say without even reading ahead. It's about our deal together.

I'm sure that you've probably received more than a few similar letters by now.

But, as you can expect, I cannot accept any further goods from you right now. Even just having your name on products riles our customers up to no end.

Of course, you must be well aware of why that is. It's because of your adopted daughter, Therese. The rumour about her 'Slandering Camilla Storm and conspiring with traitors' has really taken off lately.

I don't claim to know the truth of all this, obviously. I've heard that Miss Camilla, your niece, declined to press any charges against Therese as well.

But, well, I'm sure you can already tell, but the truth doesn't really matter at this point. Even the name 'Therese' has become infamous with most people. I've even heard of parents admonishing children who lie by using her name. The fact that it's well known you're still taking care of Therese in your home and supporting her is only adding fuel to the fire. Things may change if you publically denounced Therese and cast her out, but I don't think you have the heart to do such a thing. If you did, you wouldn't be you.

But, business is business.

And right now, I can't do business with you.

I really appreciate everything you've done for me over the years. When it comes to the arts, especially music, no one has a more discerning eye or ear than you do. I really will regret losing that incredible knowledge of yours.

But, consider our 'deal' finished as of today.

I won't ask for you to have your things returned or demand a refund, since I will not be giving your products back. Instead, I'll be waiting for the day I can once again proudly display them in my store, with your name attached.

I know that things must be difficult right now, but I'm sure that you'll find a way through.

*Your friend,
Joachim Kean.*

P.S.

I've heard that some of the composers you helped bring up to the light are being siphoned away. Is it true that kid Bartolet was stolen as well?

From what I can gather, people are seeing your hardship as an opportunity to pounce. Those guys must be having a ball, even though they can't see talent for squat, it doesn't matter if they can just steal the talents you saw yourself.

But, maybe you can learn something from them. You're a connoisseur, but you're not much of a businessman.

Did you know that, when working with those sharks, those composers only earn about 10% of the profits from their work? Almost all of the profits go straight into stuffing the pockets of their 'managers'.

Of course, they won't let that sort of news get out even if the composer learns about the trick. To see to that, they have them gagged and bound by the contract they signed.

I know you kept your own margins low to protect the composers themselves, but your leniency will probably make them easy prey to tricks like this. You need to stop worrying so much about others and worry about yourself as well. You need to find the balance between a connoisseur and a businessman.

I'm sorry if my words were too harsh.

I wish you all the best in the future.

A Letter Between Brothers

My Dear Brother, Philip,

How are you doing, Philip? It has been over a week since I last sent a letter, but I've heard that things have gotten worse for you. I am sure you've been having trouble making your payments on time as well. In that case, would it not be better to accept my offer of support?

I know full well just how badly your family was hurt because of the incident with Camilla. And I am sure that you are still blaming us for that. But, don't you think it's unbecoming of a man your age to simply ignore the letters that I send you?

I understand that you must be feeling angry right now. Certainly, Camilla is the daughter of myself and Katarina. You may even think that it is the turmoil brought about by Camilla is in part our fault as well.

But, you should know that you weren't the only ones who are hurting as a result. The truth of the matter is that Camilla really may well be innocent. And in the situation she found herself in, it's no small wonder she wanted to overturn the impending result and reverse her circumstances. However, that being said... Camilla really was thinking very selfishly. In order to clear away her crimes, she didn't spare a thought to anyone around her.

Whether that be Therese, or whether that be you. Or, even our Storm family for that matter. Both of our families are in a precarious situation because of how everyone praises Camilla, but what does she do? She hardly ever leaves the Duchy of Mohnton, and on the rare occasions that she does visit the capital, she doesn't even bother to visit her parents.

The only ones who Camilla deigns to greet are the Royal Family themselves. Just what on earth could they be holding onto her? She was never the type of girl to grovel at the foot of authority.

Fortunately, I still enjoy the trust of my friends and colleagues, so my business has been steady. Of course, there were some who abandoned me without even attempting to understand my situation, but I am sure that problem of mine is nothing compared to what you must be facing.

So, as your brother by blood and Therese's true father, let me support you now.

You must understand what you have to do.

Right now, you cannot be near Therese.

As Therese's father, please forgive me if the following words sound harsh.

But, I want you to read them carefully, for they are important for you to understand.

I've heard about everything regarding Therese.

Three months has passed since Camilla's trial, but she hasn't left her room the entire time, has she not? No matter how people call through the door, I've heard that Therese won't open the door, nor even reply. Simply putting food in front of the door and collecting the empty dishes will do nothing to save Therese.

The person most hurt by what has happened these past months is Therese herself. Of course, that does not absolve her of anything. She still committed a crime. She needs to admit and repent.

But, what was the cause of all this? Therese was obsessed with the ideal of 'family', and clung to Camilla in an attempt to find it. She believes that Camilla is her real family.

Now that Camilla has rebuked her, the void in Therese's heart needs to be filled by someone else that can truly become her family. I'm well aware that the two of you must have given Therese your love as she grew up, but that is undoubtedly different to a parent's love. Of course, this isn't your fault, but it is inevitable. That's because a parent's love isn't bound to any logic or reason.

As a father, I still love Camilla and Therese. No matter what Camilla has done to us, she's still our daughter.

Of course, the same is true for Therese. I entrusted her to your care because you were without child, and she has lived most of her life away from us, but she is still a daughter I love dearly. Even if everyone in the world hates her, this feeling of mine hasn't changed. Now that Camilla has abandoned us, Therese is my only daughter still here.

Therefore, Katarina and I will make sure that she gets the love that has been denied to her up until now. I am sure that, in our care, Therese will return to being a proper person.

It pains me to say this, but it has become a popular rumour that Therese's misguided ways are a result of her poor upbringing. Of course, this view too will fade if she returns to our side.

Do you understand? Therese needs to start fresh. She needs to be with her real family, receiving proper love and care. That way, Therese can have a future.

If she stays with the two of you, then she will be lost. This is for Therese's sake. You can't honestly intend to let things stand the way they are, where you simply feed Therese in her room for the rest of her life? Nothing will change for Therese, nor for you, if that continues on.

At any rate, let me at least see Therese once.

I will also bring over funds to support you with at that time. For the time being, let me settle your debts, and when Therese comes back into our care I shall also help rejuvenate your business.

Be sure to think about this very carefully, for the sake of Therese and for the sake of your family.

I expect a positive response.

An Ink Blotched Letter

To my dear sister,

My only sister.

I hate this, I hate this so much, sister.

Why am I writing to you again, sister, when I know I won't even send this letter?

Even though it's only autumn outside, this room is freezing and dark. And sitting in the darkness all alone, I can't help but think.

And, when I do, I find my fingers reaching for a pen. Because, what else can I do?

I can't really tell what I'm writing, since it's so dark I don't even know if these words can be read. I wonder if they even reflect the words in my mind?

Speaking of which, dear sister. I sometimes hear voices calling to me from the other side of the door.

I know who they are, as well. They're Viscount Philip Neumann, as well as his wife, Anne. I haven't responded for days, even months, but they still believe that I'll answer them when they speak.

It's true, it wouldn't be hard to say something. I could even just give them a short reply. I'm sure that the people on the other side of the door would be moved to tears if they heard anything. They would want to embrace me. Me, the person despised by the entire country.

But, you know, dear sister? I just can't answer them. Because I don't know just how I should call out to them.

In the past, I called them my father and mother. They were probably the people I loved the most in the world. Thinking back, the time when I didn't know anything and thought that they were my parents really was the happiest time in my life.

But, now I know that was all a lie.

I'm the daughter of the Storm family, and your sister. Just why are they still taking care of me like this, even though they aren't my real parents? Just what is the reason for their kindness? Is it out of respect for the Storm family? Is it to appear charitable in the public eye? Or do they just pity me?

As soon as I was born, I was given over to the Neumann family, then I was returned to the Storm family, and now I find myself in the Neumann home again. I keep being pushed one way or another, coming and going. I wonder just where I'll end up next?

Ah, I hear another voice. The person who I used to call mother is crying.

She wants to hear my voice. She wants just a word, or even a glimpse of me. She sounds desperate. The reason why she sounds more desperate than usual, I know that too.

Both she and Viscount Neumann are being coerced to return me to my father, Count Storm. He hasn't threatened them directly, but the meaning is clear. If I'm given over to them, then he will help the

Neumann family. If they don't, their finances will be destroyed, and the two of them will be thrown out into the streets.

I don't think there's any way the man who was my father can go against this. Even though he is only a mere Viscount, he has his position to think about, as well as the servants who rely on him for their livelihood. If my former mother becomes sick again as well, then he'll need money to have a doctor look at her.

It's impossible for them to keep going on like this. They're not strong people. Some day soon, I'll be dragged out of this room and taken to the Storm family estate.

But, before that happens, they want to see my face one last time. They want to pretend to be my mother and father, at least whilst I'm still here.

It's ridiculous. Even though things are so dire, they still want to play family. Even though she's not my real mother, she's been calling out my name for so long

The ink was smudged.

Since it's so dark, it's hard to write properly.

I hope she gives up and leaves soon. Whenever I hear her, my head hurts. I'm tired of thinking about all this, I don't want to think about anything anymore.

Hey, big sister, tell me, what should I have done?

What would you do in this situation, sister?

I'm sure my thick, simple and impatient big sister would never have let herself rot away in this room. Back in the old days, you always used to happily do whatever you liked, sister, without even thinking about the consequences.

But, at that time... do you remember, sister?

I've been locked up like this before. Unlike my sister, I'm quite the delicate child, I can't take things as easily as you do. But, that time was especially bad. It was when I realized that the Neumann family weren't my real parents.

I stayed in my room, just like now, and didn't let anyone see me. Not the maids or servants who knocked, nor the people who called themselves my parents who called out to me.

I'm sure you don't remember this at all, do you, sister? Since you don't particularly care about me at all, right?

But, I remember it. It was from that day that I began to hate the big sister of mine that I loved so much.

Then, one day when I was still locking myself away, you climbed through my window, big sister, and forced your way in.

Then, when you saw me crying on the bed, you pulled me by the arm and said;

“I don’t know why you’ve locked yourself up. Just what is your problem? If you have something to say, then just say it!”

You really are a simple and straight forward person. That’s how my big sister’s world is, after all.

Someone with real parents, someone who is too stupid to worry about the consequences, someone who can say whatever they like without a care. Someone who can happily live without knowing who their true sister really is.

But, there’s no way I could have been like that. The people who call themselves my parents aren’t my real parents, I know when I’m being pushed away or treated coldly, I was abandoned by my real mother and father, and my older sister never even knew who I really was. But, what should I say? Should I tell the two people who call through the door that ‘you’re not my real parents.’?

...No. You wouldn’t say such a thing either, dear sister.

I am sure that my sister would be even more honest and frank than that. You wouldn’t worry about the other person’s feelings.

You wouldn’t have to worry about inconveniencing those around you, you would simply say whatever you wanted, like always.

I really am jealous of you, big sister. I wish I could do that too. I hate that about you, sister. I’ve always wanted a big sister like that. Because, I couldn’t do something like that myself.

Dear sister, what should I do?

Am I going to be thrown away again?

Just whose child will I end up being this time?

Letters Between Camilla and Her Aunt

Dear Camilla Storm,

It has been a long time since we last spoke, this is Anne Neumann.

The reason I wrote is that I have a favour to ask of you, Lady Camilla. This is a secret from my husband, Philip, as I wrote to you on my own discretion.

There is only one thing I can ask of you. It's about our daughter, Therese.

I am very much aware of what our Therese did to you, Lady Camilla.

My daughter's actions aren't something that can ever be forgiven. I am willing to stand side by side with my daughter to make amends in whichever way is possible.

But, despite that, I still wish to make a request of you, Lady Camilla.

Please, could you visit Therese, just once? Even if it's for but a brief moment. I would be eternally grateful.

Therese has shut herself away in her room, and doesn't want to meet with anyone. She doesn't answer us when we call out to her, and we haven't seen her face in so long. The only time we enter her room is to leave her meals, otherwise she would starve.

But, it was during one of these times that I found letters addressed to you, Lady Camilla, in Therese's room. Most of them were torn and blotted and I couldn't make them out, but from what I could read they all seemed to be calling out to you constantly, time and time again.

Perhaps, if it's Lady Camilla, Therese may finally answer.

I feel we don't have any choice now but to rely on your strength.

I am very sorry for this sudden and selfish request.

But, please, I implore you to consider it in your reply.

Please, I implore you.

Yours Sincerely,

Anne Neumann

Dear Aunt Neumann,

I'm sorry for the belated reply, this is Camilla.

I've received several letters from Uncle about Therese, but I've never sought an apology from the two of you. As I've said before, the one who needs to apologize isn't Aunt or Uncle, but Therese herself.

I have also heard about Therese's current situation. That she's become withdrawn, and doesn't speak to anyone, is that it? She has never acted that way before, so I can understand why my Aunt and Uncle are so worried.

However, it would be rude of me to be untruthful to you, so I'll be blunt. I have no desire to meet Therese. Even if Aunt and Uncle have apologized to me profusely, I have never received a single word from Therese. Just why should I meet with such a girl?

I have no intention of blaming you for Therese's behaviour, Aunt Neumann. But, I can't help but think that your request goes too far. You know the history Therese and I have, yet despite that you still asked me to help. This may be rude of me to say, but I feel that you are asking for too much. If she wants to meet with me, then Therese should send word herself.

In the first place, this is a problem between Aunt, Uncle and Therese, it has nothing to do with me. I don't feel as if there is anything I could do. What's more, if Aunt and Uncle aren't able to solve this problem with their own power, then what is the meaning in it?

I've been indebted to Aunt and Uncle many times in the past, and I would like to help if possible.

But, this sort of request is something that I simply cannot do.

I am sorry, but please ask someone else.

*Yours,
Camilla Storm*

Dear Lady Camilla,

It's Anne Neumann. Thank you for replying to my letter.

Although I hesitate since I was refused once already, I can't give up, so I have taken up my pen once again.

I cannot go against the words that you wrote in your last letter. It is completely reasonable for you to have no desire or interest to help Therese, considering everything that has happened.

Even if you came, Lady Camilla, there's no guarantee it would solve anything. We are also well aware that such issues should be solved within the Neumann family.

However... However, all the same, I wish to ask once more for your aid, Lady Camilla.

No matter how meaningless, fruitless or selfish this request may be. Please meet with Therese and speak with her.

We can't get Therese to leave her room. I am sure that the reason that Therese cannot meet our eyes or respond to our words anymore is because she considers herself a Storm. Once we were forced to let her go, I am sure that the trust between us was gone, and our words couldn't reach her.

I am sure that, to her, Camilla is the only one who had never lied to her. Our Therese... we've been with her since the beginning, and raised her with all the love and care we can offer, but it pains me to have to put you in such a position as this, Lady Camilla. But, no matter what, she is my daughter. She is the daughter of Phillip and myself.

We would do anything for that child's sake. Even if it risks upsetting you, Lady Camilla, no matter how much you refuse, hate or scorn me, I cannot give up.

Please, meet with our daughter. Please, save our daughter.

Please, I beg of you.

*Yours Sincerely,
Anne Neumann*

Dear Aunt Neumann,

I have read your letter.

I understand your strong feelings, Aunt Neumann, but, even so, I remain unconvinced.

You know what Therese has done to me, you know full well just what I think of Therese, yet you still insist on telling me to meet with her?

You say that, since Therese is your daughter, you're fine with upsetting me, despite me being your niece?

Aunt, I can't help but be upset with you, now.

Talking about Therese like this, you must know just how it makes me feel. You cannot pretend to not know, Aunt Neumann.

And yet, still, you ask me this? You know, yet you still do so.

I think this is all far too much. I had always looked up to you as a kind and gentle aunt.

But, with this kind of treatment, I can't help but feel disillusioned.

...But, it seems that my Aunt doesn't mind how much I am disillusioned with her if it's for Therese's sake, is that correct? No matter how much you upset me, or caused me to think ill of you, you don't mind so long as it's to help Therese, is that it? You really would do anything for your daughter, wouldn't you?

I suppose that's what a mother really is meant to be like.

I will talk to Lord Alois about going to the capital.

Even though Mohnton is still very busy right now, I am sure that I should be able to spend a day or two in the capital if I ask.

*From,
Camilla Storm*

P.S.

It seems that I will be able to visit the royal capital soon.

However, you shouldn't expect too much, since I expect there's not much I can do.

The person that Therese needs right now is definitely not me.

Camilla's Letter to Her Aunt and Uncle

Dear Aunt Neumann, Uncle Neumann.

I'm sorry for all the fuss I caused.

Because of what happened, I couldn't say goodbye to you properly as I left, so I wrote this letter in the carriage.

I truly am sorry that I got into a fight with Therese. But, I had a hunch that something like this would happen. There was no way me meeting that girl would go smoothly.

Just thinking back on it makes me angry. Therese still wouldn't apologize to me, and just what was with the attitude she had towards you, Aunt and Uncle!? She really is just a selfish little girl!

Seeing Therese like that, I remembered something from the past. When I was small, Therese had become withdrawn in a similar way. I was really young at the time, so it's little wonder I had forgotten, but do Aunt and Uncle remember what Therese was like back then?

She was unhappy, but she never said anything, she just sulked. It really as if she hasn't changed at all. Usually, she can't stop talking, but when I tell her to talk about the really important things, she can't say a word. If you just stay silent like that, how on earth is anyone supposed to understand you!?

Despite everything, even though I went into her room and she wouldn't say a word at me, I apologize for getting so angry. I knew from the beginning, but there really isn't anything I can do.

But, maybe that's not such a bad thing.

I'm only telling you now since I'm still angry, but I am under no obligation to help Therese. I really do think that Aunt Neumann's request was asking far too much. What's more, you didn't tell me about what has been happening to Uncle either. If I do things like this and people find out, then Uncle's position might end up worsening even further.

Uncle Neumann is still my Uncle. If you had both told me everything earnestly, I wouldn't have been angry. When I came to the house, it was only then that I truly understood your situation. Even though you're going through so much, you can't bring yourselves to abandon Therese.

I don't want to sound reproachful. No, rather, I suppose I am, but to Aunt and Uncle, I am only your niece. An outsider to your home. Even if I ask you to understand my feelings, I know that you have to consider them completely differently from your daughter's. That's why, no matter how angry you'd knew I would get, you still came to ask me for help, right?

I'm still furious with Therese. I really, really can't seem to get along with her. No matter how much you ask me, I will never do this again.

Ah, and thank you for offering to return the favour somehow as I left. At the time, I told you I didn't need anything, but I've changed my mind. I believe that I will ask for compensation in full.

Of course, I will not ask for money. I don't think that Uncle is capable of paying right now, anyways. But, I don't want to throw away the favour either.

So, I will make a request that I hope you will fulfill, even if it means going to great lengths. I have run into some trouble of my own, as well. So, I hope that it is something that my Aunt and Uncle can help me with. Well, I will speak with Lord Alois about it further.

When I return home to Mohnton, I will write to you both again.

I won't let you say that you've forgotten the favour you owe, so please be prepared.

*Yours,
Camilla Storm*

P.S.

I suppose this isn't something so important as to add in the postscript, but...

I once wished that I could have had parents like Aunt and Uncle.

So, please don't think that I hate you. That's not it at all.

Please make sure to take care of yourselves. I can't say much, since I'm still not sure just what the future holds, but...

I am still your niece. When the time comes, you can rely on me.

Therese's Scrawl

Sister, sister, sister.

Why did you come? Just how could you step in like that, sister?

Sister, I really didn't know... not at all.

I was in my room for so long I didn't notice at all!

There aren't any servants in the house anymore. There's nothing in the house at all!

The precious piano that father loved so much was gone, all the books that were a memento of my grandfather were gone, and mother's health has gotten worse.

Because of our cut ties with the Storm family, there's no way the debts could be repaid, so everything in the house was sold, and soon even the peerage and the house itself will be gone.

I didn't know at all.

Sister, what should I do?

Sister, because of me, father and mother are going to lose everything.

...I wonder if I should go to the Storm family, after all?

So long as I'm gone, father's work will go well, and money will start to come in. Then, I'm sure that my mother will be able to afford to see a doctor as well.

I know father and mother won't like it, but they'll be better off if I'm gone.

Ah...

Ahh, ahh... so that's it.

So that's how it is, sister.

In the end, I really just want the same thing that father and mother wanted, don't I?

Even though we went through hardships and struggled, they wanted to stay together as a family.

If I leave now, wouldn't it just be me trying to get away from father and mother?

...Sister.

Hey, sister, will they be alright?

Can they really carry this kind of burden?

Can I say what I really want to say?

That, even if I'm not their real daughter, even if people hate, can I really stay with them?

Letters Therese Didn't Know About

Dear Patrick Storm,

Brother, no matter how many letters you send me, my feelings on this matter will not change.

I do not need your help. I will never give Therese to you. I will make sure to return all the money that you've lent to me over the years. It is impossible for me right now, but I will make sure to do it, even if it takes me the rest of my life.

So, please do not send me any more letters. We will solve this as a family, both Therese's situation and my own.

Up until now, I have always been indebted to you, brother. You have helped me many times. I truly am grateful for that. I owe where I am today to your help, brother. I will never forget that.

However, brother... I can't forgive you for trying to take Therese away when I was away from home. Since then, she hasn't eaten any food, and has been crying in her room all this time.

I know that you took this action for Therese's sake.

Therefore, I will not hate you for what you've done. I am sure that you consider your ideas to be a kindness.

That being said, brother, allow me to be blunt.

It is none of your business.

We will solve our own problems as a family.

Neither Therese's guilt or remorse have anything to do with you, brother. It is something for us to bear on our own. So, please accept that this is the current situation.

I will manage both my current work and the debts I owe by myself. I will also be leaving this home in the near future, so I will not be receiving anymore of your letters. I will make sure to send the money I owe you through a middle man.

Never involve yourself with our daughter ever again.

Up until now, I have been in your care, brother. So, I am very sorry that things have come to this.

I won't ask you to forgive this heartless brother of yours.

However, in the future, I sincerely hope that you will someday find happiness, brother.

Philip Neumann

To my friend, Philip Neumann,

Hey, what was with that letter the other day?

Closing down your business, attaching some money, telling me about finding some new job and then just telling me to take care of your place? What is going on?

You do know I'm not some sort of massive operation, right? Even if we're friends, you could've been at least a little more reserved about all this? This is why I can't stand nobles.

God damn it. After all, you couldn't give up on Therese, huh? I heard you even cut off connections with your own brother. Just what do you plan on doing for money?

I'm sorry I cut you off so suddenly before as well. I'm regretting it. But, you had to understand just what kind of position I was in, right?

If you ask me, I'll lend you some money. But, it won't be me as a friend lending it, it would be the Joachim Kean Company.

Don't deal with merchants naively. We're always after profit, after all.

First, we'll discuss interest rates. Then we can talk about just what you plan on doing in the future.

Don't quit your work. You're the only one with such a talented ear around here, if you just change up your practice a little but I am certain you'll turn a tidy profit. Use this loan as the first rung on the ladder to starting again.

Then, we will definitely display the products that you recommend at my store. Of course, labelling them with 'Neumann' is completely out. We'll find you a proper pseudonym to use.

Of course, we'll have a chat about contracts as well. If I leave you to handle clients on your own again, you'll stay destitute. Whenever you find someone, make sure to let me handle the negotiations. You'll make money, so I won't let you object.

If you don't meet these conditions, I can't lend you money or offer you a place to live.

Make sure to get back to me soon. We don't want the Storm family to find out about this, do we? When you flee in the night, make sure not to leave a trail.

Your friend,
Joachim Kean

P.S.

To be honest, I'm still a little pissed.

I don't want to bad mouth your brother too much, but... From the outside looking in, I always felt like you were the one getting lowballed.

I'm sure that, right now, you're feeling responsible for everything. It must be tough to go from nobility to this, I'm sure.

But, anyway, make sure to reply to me quickly. We're gonna be busy from now on.

Alois Montchat's Business Letter

Dear Aunt Neumann and Uncle Neumann,

Uncle, Aunt, I received the news.

That, after all, you really have moved out of your house. Well, I'm glad that you managed to get Therese to leave her room. She won't have her own room in your new house, right? I'm sure it will be good medicine. If she doesn't take time to reflect on all of this, then she won't be able to heal.

Of course, I'm sure that Aunt and Uncle are reflecting as well... though, you don't need me to say something like that. You've already apologized more than enough times. But, words are cheap, actions speak much louder.

The details of what I mean by that are enclosed in Alois' accompanying letter. So, please read through it carefully.

So... I suppose this is already the postscript.

Please don't worry so much. I suppose I've been... how should I put it, bearing a grudge? After getting mad like that... I want to move past this.

So, please don't think about it too deeply. It also hurts when I read your apologies. I understand that, for Aunt and Uncle, Therese really is your only daughter, right? If you had put my feelings above hers, then you wouldn't really be her parents, would you?

...Then, that was my letter.

Next time, please tell Therese to write me an apology. Even if she doesn't mean it.

*Yours,
Camilla Storm*

Dear Viscount Philip Neumann,

My apologies for the sudden letter. My name is Alois Montchat.

I'm writing to you now after Miss Camilla introduced me.

I have never met you in person, but I have heard all sorts of things about you.

That you have a deep and comprehensive knowledge of art and music, and that your piano skills are good enough to match the maestros. I would love to listen to you play.

You've worked hard to establish a business that makes full use of your gifts, helping aspiring artists to compile their works and selling sheet music. If you'd allow me, I would like to take the time to discuss your rich tapestry of knowledge of the arts.

The truth is, there is a musician in Mohnton I've had my eye on for some time now.

Although he is a very stubbornly wilful person, from my perspective he is an older gentleman with a great wealth of talent. Of course, he isn't young anymore, but considering the stunning amount of work

he has created over the years that is nearly unknown to all, it would be a shame to let him fade into obscurity now.

I would like you to help me let the world know about his genius by creating and distributing musical scores based upon his work, but there is hardly anyone here with any experience in such a matter, and I have no connections in the royal capital to move such works. I was at a complete loss as to what to do, that was until Miss Camilla told me about your current predicament.

The preface to my request has been quite long, but I'm sure that if you've read this far, then you will understand.

This is the only thing that I would ask of you.

I wish to sell that old man's music in the royal capital.

I would like to leave the introduction of his pieces to the orchestras and operas, as well as the sales of his sheet music, entirely in your hands.

Of course, this is being done under the patronage of the House of Montchat. So, I would like the sales to be made under the Montchat name as well.

It's embarrassing to admit, but with the way the reporters write about me, I feel like my name holds a lot more currency than it used to. Since I am asking you to sell the music of a completely unknown musician, I hope that you can use the momentary popularity of my name to your advantage. Part of my reasons for doing this is to establish a high opinion in the value of Mohnton as a land of art and culture.

You may resent me for not allowing you to use your name, but please understand that this is a business decision. However, even if you cannot make a name for that old man in the royal capital, I promise that I will still offer you a reward that would make your efforts worthwhile.

If you are interested, let us discuss the specifics in person. At that time, I can introduce the old man to you as well. He really is a stubborn one, however... if half of what I've heard from Miss Camilla about you is true, I am sure you will be up to the challenge.

I am sure that our talk will be fruitful for the both of us.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

*Kind Regards,
Alois Montchat*

The Beginning of Therese's Long, Long Letter (END)

My Dear Sister,

It has been a while, hasn't it sister? It's me. Your cute little sister, Therese.

I wonder just how long it has been since the last time we met? How are you doing? Well, I suppose I don't even have to ask, do I? Even if I didn't want to hear anything about you, sister, people just never stop talking about what you're up to.

Things have been so busy here that I haven't been able to take the time to write. I've always been writing letters to you, sister, but for some reason or another I haven't actually sent you any for a long time. Isn't it strange?

That's why, I'm sure that this time it will be a long letter. There are so many things I want to write to you about. About our new house, about that strange old man who came from the swamp, about how my father began to play the piano again side by side with that swamp man?

I suppose that, from my sister's point of view, you're much more interested in an apology than any of that? Who knows, perhaps I wrote it at the very end of this letter? So, please make sure to read carefully and check, okay?

Ah, but, I should write the most important thing of all first.

Because, my sister really is ill-tempered and impatient, after all. I'm sure you'll scan straight through this letter and throw it away if you don't see an apology straight away.

So, with that said, sister...

Congratulations on your marriage.

I hope that you'll be happy. That's something I've always thought, from the bottom of my heart.

Because, I am your sister, after all.